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THE TABLES TURN...

Licensing in the Land of the Rising Sun



By Charles Ayres
Character Development
Vice President
Sun R&P Co., Ltd.
Tokyo, Japan
charles.a@sun-rp.com

When I began studying Japanese as a child in Kansas City of all places, people thought I was from Mars. I studied Japanese from comic books and people would always ask me, "Why are you reading 'Speed Racer?'" as this was the only Japanese style comic art they had seen. Interest in characters from Japan in the late '80s made me an anomaly at best or an utter freak at worst. My how times have changed! You cannot swing a dead cat without hitting a child carrying a Pokemon game. Bakugan, Sanrio and Dragon Ball have become household names. With eyes that take up 75% their heads and Botticelli-esque hair, Japanese cartoons have given Disney a run for its money, knocked domestic cartoons off

the air in some countries and now take up a good portion of the worldwide licensing market. Go Speed Racer, indeed!

Twenty years after my dressing down at the hands of my MidWestern peers, I now specialize in exporting Japanese character brands to the greater world at Sun Properties - a division of Sun R&P

that brings Hollywood studio properties to the masses of Japan. Today I would like to be your tour guide

and chaperone you on a brief tour through world of licensing in the Land of the Rising Sun. Strap on your Hello Kitty helmet and fasten your Bean Jam Man safety belts and away we go.

First off you must wonder why the Japanese possess this obsession with characters and animation. Grown women fawn over Snoopy beer steins and men in their fifties openly read

rate and liven up a small space.

I asked prominent East Asian sociology expert Prof. James Farrer of Tokyo's Sophia University for his take on Japan's obsession with character goods and he asserted that they allow people to be part of a fandom or group in a country that is famous for being "group oriented" rather than "individual oriented":

"Japanese consumers embrace characters because they place value on affiliation and specialized learning. Embracing a character means belonging to a group of people who also embrace the character. However these types of consumer-fantasy groups make no demands on the individual, so they are very "light" forms of commitment. Many

characters also give people a chance to spend time learning about some sort of alternative play world, which can take the form of a "hobby," which many adults in Japan see as an important part of a balanced lifestyle" (Via email, 2009: August 21).

In many ways Japanese society remains rigid or conservative, so small, cute items provide some color in a country where small children often study until late at night in cram schools to join a competitive corporate culture that might seem grim otherwise. Cute items create a spark of joy in a sea of black suits and charcoal-and-navy school uniforms. At one company I worked in Tokyo (unrelated to licensing), the president kept a framed portrait of Mickey Mouse up on the wall. When singing Karaoke even the elderly will proudly belt out the cartoon

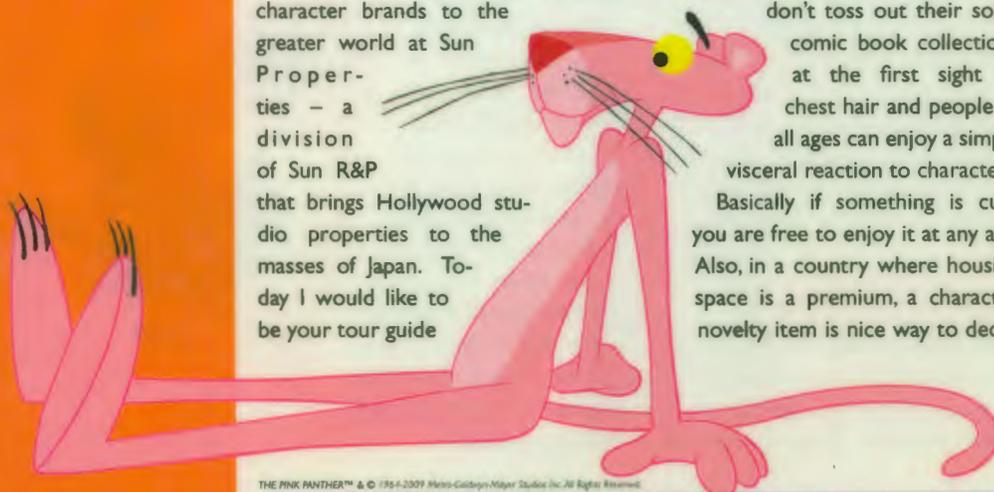
Rilakkuma



sexually explicit comics on the train to work. If Walt Disney were alive today he would think, "You guys are taking the animation thing WAY too far." Unlike the West there exists no cut off age at which teens are supposed to, "Stop watching cartoons." Moms

don't toss out their sons' comic book collections at the first sight of chest hair and people of all ages can enjoy a simple visceral reaction to characters.

Basically if something is cute you are free to enjoy it at any age. Also, in a country where housing space is a premium, a character novelty item is nice way to deco-



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theme songs from their youth. So what does this cartoon mania mean? It means Character Database calculates character licensing as a business as worth 1.5 Trillion Yen

horde domain names. Once you have your local partner and correct trademarks, companies must think outside the box. Figurines of your character? Yesterday's news. Golashes, tote bags, lunch boxes and other items of high utility value? Now we are talking.

Also, Japanese people LOVE anniversaries. Not the anniversary where you buy your wife a crock pot and take her to Olive Garden, Japanese love MEDIA anniversaries. Generally you need to wait for the anniversary in terms of fives: fifth, tenth, fifteenth, eightieth etc. Anniversaries give people in the media something to discuss on the morning TV chat shows, and if the right media outlets pick up on your character a resurgence might be inevitable. MGM's Pink Panther struck gold after fashion magazines in Ja-

Japan. Some DVD rental shops group the movies by actor rather than genre. The trick is to know which type of celebrity hits the mark in Japan. For example, when it comes to sirens of the silver screen Audrey Hepburne has always been higher profile than Marilyn Monroe in Japan. Sure, Japanese love some Marilyn: she came to Tokyo with DiMaggio, she had those Warhol prints, and every Japanese video store has a Monroe corner. However, with Monroe's va-va-voom curves and bleached out plumage, she does not have a look that petite Japanese women aspire too. Hepburne, on the other hand, has a smart and luminescent quality that Japanese women adore. With a little effort Japanese women could have a similar look to Hepburne, and this makes her image a high profile license for everything from credit cards to hand fans to decorative tins. The modish image of the early Beatles has nearly cult like status in Japan in contrast to Elvis Presley who is warmly remembered but fails to generate the same hysteria – errr Beatlemania. Living or dead, it is wise to be aware that certain celebrities resonate with the Japanese in ways different from the West, and some celebrities are much bigger in Japan than back home (Cheap Trick Live at the Budokan, anyone?). Speaking of living celebrities, you can get away with using foreign celebrities for many things unthinkable in the West. In the USA, A-List movie stars might not deign to appear in mere TV adverts, but if a Japanese company will drop a million dollars for a thirty second spot limited to Japan, Hollywood's big-

gest names come running. As lampooned by Bill Murray in *Lost in Translation*, the crème de la crème will gladly make a pit stop across the Pacific for a day of shooting. Harrison Ford, Cameron Diaz, Tommy Lee Jones and Brad Pitt gladly hawk Kirin beer, cell

2008 Most Popular Character Ranking in Japan

(Source Character Database)

- 1 Pocket Monsters (Pokémon)
- 2 Go! Anpanman (Bear Jam Man)
- 3 Hello Kitty
- 4 Mickey Mouse
- 5 Rilakkuma (Relaxation Bear)
- 6 Winnie the Pooh
- 7 Purikyua Series (Pretty Cure Series)
- 8 Super Mario Brothers
- 9 Power Rangers RPM
- 10 Stitch (from Lilo & Stitch)

(\$16 Billion USD) – although other estimates put the figure well past 2.4 Trillion (\$25 Billion USD). People and organizations that do not need a cute character whatsoever even create cartoon mascots. Frankly the market is glutted with hundreds of characters, some cute and some not-so-cute. The public lambasted the local government of a region called Nara for representing itself with a hideous deer creature with a temple roof (!) on its head (Manto-Kun). Also, the Tokyo Police designed Pi-Po, a mouse in a blue hat that looks like Mighty Mouse's wimpy cousin. Pi-Po can help educate kids about public safety and admonish disorderly drunks, but he isn't about to scare the drug dealers and murderers of Tokyo into giving up a life of crime. With the deluge of characters flooding the market of Japan, where might the mavens of licensing turn to make their money? What can you do to cash in on licensing in Japan? Finding a local partner to help navigate the structural and cultural obstacles would be a good first start. Also, you should suss out the trademark situation tout-suite – some people horde trademarks in Japan in the same vein as people who

pan widely covered New York illustrator Shag's reinterpretation of the Pink Panther for the feline's 40th anniversary in 2004. This led to a Pink Panther collaboration with music mega-company Avex that lit the fire to create Panther mania in Japan. The twenty-fifth anniversary of Ghostbusters has helped lead to related items such as T-shirts and sneakers by A Bathing Ape. As the third installment of the Ghostbusters series approaches in 2012 the "no ghost" mark is sure to become as ubiquitous as when we roller skated to Ray Parker Jr. back in 1984. The tenth anniversary of my life in Japan approaches, and I thoroughly plan to character license myself and sell Charles Ayres galoshes and bean jam buns. By extension from film, celebrities as a brand are very important in



Right: Pi-Po, the Tokyo Police Mascot



phones, canned coffee and denim jeans respectively. Rather than being a

detriment to their image here, it makes their brand all the more valuable as publications like Nikkei Entertainment actually rank celebrities in importance by the number of commercials they appear in simultaneously. Also, scandal about a foreign celebrity does not tarnish their image as much as back home simply because of the distance and the fact that the media here focuses more on the misadventures of domestic celebrities. Michael Jackson still drew crowds in Tokyo after his courtroom drama.

When people speak of Paris Hilton in the USA they speak in tones that seem to herald the next Babylon. In

Japan, Hilton is just a glamorous –if ditzzy – Hollywood personality (and the face of one of the most popular handbag lines).

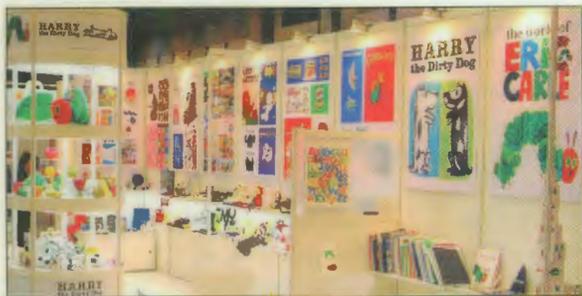
Japan has a place for kitsch, characters and novelty that remains unsurpassed in the Western world so, as much as the po-faced economic analysts poohpoo the economy there is still lots of business in the trade of licensing. People still can fork out over twenty to forty dollars for watermelons here so if they want your character item people will find a way to buy it. Finally, Japanese tend to be loyal consumers so play the game right and you – like the band Cheap Trick – could be raking in cash here well after your character or license has ceased to be relevant anywhere else.

So come on over to Japan, make some money, and watch out for the cartoon police mouse that will admonish you for drinking too much sake.

Left: Nara Prefecture's Manto-Kun

LICENSING ASIA 2009

Licensing Asia 2009 will open its doors on 14 to 16 October this year and, once again, takes place at Tokyo Big Sight (the Tokyo International Center).



Following a number of successful shows in recent years, this year's event has a several new themes and developments which the organizers believe will help to grow the show over years to come.

Organized by the Licensing Asia Executive Committee, and sponsored by LIMA, Japan's brand and character licensing business show has undergone a number of major changes in its eighth year. These enhancements are designed to help visitors succeed in

this leading licensing market - and the world's third largest economy.

The theme of Licensing Asia 2009 is "Licensing creates Exciting New Consumer Markets" – which reflects the organizers' enthusiasm for the business and firm belief that licensing has the power to revitalize markets in this recession.

This year, for the first time, Licensing Asia

now joins the Japanese government-backed, CoFesta (Japan International Contents Festival) as one of eighteen official events that form one of the world's largest contents festivals. Other events include the Tokyo Game Show and the Tokyo International Film Festival. Licensing Asia 2009 will now be the only event in CoFesta dedicated to licensing. Through CoFesta, Licensing Asia 2009 will benefit from more extensive PR and exposure, which is expected to yield the largest-ever

number of business visitors.

New plans for Licensing Asia 2009 include a pre-opening Press-Only hour on the first day and the "License of the Year in Japan" awards and networking party on the second day. In addition, there will be retail product display areas, as well as a Brand Communication and other themed zones. Pre-existing initiatives such as the keynote presentation and exhibitor coverage in the Nikkei, Japan's top business newspaper, will remain.

Licensing Asia 2009 will also offer a 24/7 year-round portal website that enables exhibitors to reach a licensing-centric audience by leveraging the attendee database.

For further information about exhibiting or visiting Licensing Asia 2009, visit www.licensing-asia.jp/english/

