

# sustainable japan

ESG promotional content  
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## To create business value, first create shared value

### Roundtable

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The phrase “sustainable business” seems to be everywhere these days, but what exactly does it mean for brands and consumers in Japan? James Hollow, CEO and founder of the strategic consultancy Fabric K.K., recently addressed the topic with The Japan Times, sharing his insights about helping businesses create shared value with their customers and communities.

Fabric is an affiliate of the MullenLowe Group, a global marketing communications network headquartered in London. Hollow, who hails from Great Britain, started out as a brand and business strategist in London and then Tokyo. His most recent position was co-CEO of the Asia-Pacific region for MullenLowe before founding Fabric this past spring.

“We are trying to enable businesses and brands in the new social fabric which is emerging,” said Hollow. “The companies are looking at it as a journey, but they are not quite sure what the destination is and how they are going to get there.” Within this context, they should be aware that they have an impact on people and society, and embrace this reality “as an opportunity to revire.”

For example, Hollow praises Japan for its waste separation and litter-free streets, but

points out that there are hidden issues too, such as the fact that waste is often disposed of through incineration, which causes air pollution.

“I do think that Japan is in catch-up mode at both the government and corporate level, and there has been some complacency,” he said. “Japan has a clean society but the world has moved on, and if you see the SDG world rankings and the indices, you can see where countries need to act.”

“SDG” stands for the sustainable development goals that were adopted in September 2015 at a United Nations summit on achieving the ideal of a sustainable, diverse and inclusive society.

### Surveying sustainability

As for consumers, they make decisions through the brands they purchase. Identifying a data gap, Hollow and his team wanted to support Japanese firms by conducting research on consumer decisions and “creating a framework for tracking year on year.”

About 5,300 people between the ages of 18 and 65 participated in Fabric’s survey, which examined the behavior and attitudes of consumers with respect to sustainability, including their perception of brand’s performance in three main areas:

- What does sustainability mean to Japanese consumers, and to what extent do they care?
- To what extent do they know or care about the sustainability of brands?



James Hollow, CEO and founder of the strategic consultancy Fabric K.K. TAKU INOUE FOR PHOTOMATE

- How can brands stay competitive in terms of sustainability?

The survey results, which can be downloaded from the company’s website, show that while the majority of Japanese are not yet making choices based on sustainability, a small but growing group of consumers are factoring it into their purchasing habits. “By providing this data, we want to embolden the companies to make decisions. So they can go to their CEO, commission a study or set up a task force to see how they can make their supply chain more sustainable,”

said Hollow.

“One thing that we talk about at Fabric is creating shared value between the customer and the brand: Consumers buy it and get some functional or emotional benefit, and the company gets the funds,” he said referencing the *sampo-yoshi* (three-way good) concept, where the third dimension represents the opportunity for brands. “If you’re thinking about maximizing the shared value between the company, your customers and your stakeholders, then you’re not going to go far wrong.”

### Global brands’ influence

Hollow also commented on the role of “dollar voting” — the impact of consumers’ purchasing decisions — and how it can be more important than democratic voting. For example, he pointed out that although environmental protection efforts by any one country’s government have a limited impact, due to fiscal and physical constraints, when a global brand decides to ban plastic, the effects are felt worldwide.

In the case of Japan, Hollow noted, “Politics have been kept separate from everything else. I don’t think that Japanese companies have traditionally liked to express political options, and you don’t see much of that on the TV ads, but I think it is shifting due to the influence of global brands.”

“I think where Japan really needs to change gears is on gender equality, and this is something that really been highlighted by the Tokyo Olympics,” Hollow said candidly, referring to the Tokyo Olympic chief’s exit over sexist remarks a few weeks before the Games began. “This has highlighted how the Japanese establishment is not sustainable, and society here has benefited from that.”

Hollow says many global brands have made investments in environmental issues, such as removing plastic from their supply chains or ensuring that palm oil does not come from recently deforested areas.

“These investments are really beginning to pay off in Europe and parts of the U.S. You won’t get a tailwind in Japan at this point yet if you talk about sustainable palm oil,” Hollow said. “However, it is a chance to invest in the education of consumers, and I think the role of the global brands is to show how these investments they have made in societal issues have become an advantage, and then Japanese domestic brands will be influenced by this.”



Fabric is a strategic consultancy that helps businesses reframe problems to create shared value. TAKU INOUE FOR PHOTOMATE

### Play to your strengths

Looking ahead, what concrete steps can brands here in Japan take to leverage their position within the new social fabric that is emerging to become more sustainable? Pointing out that “you can’t manage what you are not measuring,” Hollow said that the first step is for companies to do their homework and collect data on the impact they are having both physically and socially, which will then help them to identify their strong and weak points.

“Our research has proved that when companies are amplifying their signature strengths, it is really paying off,” he explained. However, it is also important for companies to be transparent about the areas in which they could improve.

“Everyone can be part of this: Measure where you are at, understand what your strengths and weaknesses are, and then put strategic plans in place to amplify your strengths and make sure your weaknesses are mitigated. Honesty is the only sustainable approach!” Hollow said in closing.

You can download the report at <https://fbc.co/en/case-study/sustainability>

Roundtable is a monthly series of English-language events organized by The Japan Times Cube. For more information visit <https://sustainable.japantimes.com/roundtable>



James Hollow and Roundtable host Ross Rowbury doing the COVID-19 version of a handshake. TAKU INOUE FOR PHOTOMATE

## Troubled teens find solace with Saori Okada’s support network

### ESG/SDGs

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Saori Okada has been reaching out, day or night, to teenagers in need of mental and emotional support for the past nine years. As a victim of physical and mental violence and bullying who also experienced a number of hardships including drug abuse, depression, divorce, poverty and suicide attempts, she knows that teens facing such difficulties are desperate for someone to communicate with.

“There wasn’t anybody who was doing what I am doing when I was young and desperate. That’s why I started doing this,” Okada said, stressing the importance of hearing their voices and responding with love and care.

At first, she accepted mainly SNS messages from those who visited her personal blog, which she set up to share her tough experiences and encourage youths. The number of people she counseled, initially just a few per month, grew rapidly. Volunteers started to gather too, prompting her to turn her personal activity into an organized one to offer timely and professional support for those who are on the edge. This is how the nonprofit Teenagers’ Mental Support Association was established in 2015.

The Champion of Change Japan Award (CCJA) — founded by philanthropist Atsuko Toko Fish, who has been active in Japan and the U.S. — selected Okada as one of the five winners in 2020. The award is presented to female leaders in Japan

who are dedicated to addressing social issues and needs.

According to recent statistics, Japan has the Group of Seven’s highest suicide rate among people between the ages of 15 and 34. Okada fears the figure may continue to increase as youths’ situations worsen due to the COVID-19 pandemic. “We received about 24,000 requests for consultation from about 3,000 youths in May last year, and the numbers reached 41,000 requests from 4,200 youths in December,” said Okada. The figures seem to be increasing in proportion to higher stress levels in the adults around adolescents, she said, and 20% to 30% of the cases involve abuse.

There are child consultation centers that can provide temporary shelter to those who need protection, but she pointed out difficulties that may arise. “During the stay in a child consultation center, kids cannot go to school. Those who felt they belonged only at school are tempted to return home. They have to wear borrowed, shared underwear. No smartphones are allowed,” Okada said, expressing the dilemma that teenagers face when they need help but do not want to be reported to child consultation centers.

“Some of them try to seek space for themselves on the internet and fall victim to adults with evil intentions,” she said. Teens are just a few years away from becoming independent, but those years are long when they are trapped in misery with no place to hide.

To be available online for such youths at any time, she and more than 40 counselors with various specialties — from



Organized by Saori Okada, hair and makeup was provided for teens who later celebrated Halloween together. SAORI OKADA

domestic violence, sexual abuse, bullying, LGBT issues, self-injury behavior, drug abuse and eating disorders to nursing, child care, psychology, financial planning and entertainment — take turns staying online to make sure callers are matched with the counselors most suited to their par-



Saori Okada

ticular problems. Okada noted that the counselors are ready to deal with shocking statements and stories, such as about recent suicide attempts, because most have gone through similar experiences themselves.

In addition to online consultations, the association organizes online gatherings three times a week to replace the monthly face-to-face events it conducted before the pandemic.

Okada said adults need to change in order to improve teens’ situations. To increase the number of adults who can provide support for at-risk teens, the organization has also been offering courses to train counselors. Okada and her team also established the Ladies’ Mental Support Association to reach out to women with issues and concerns, especially mothers. “We also want to network with various organizations across the nation so we can ensure both offline and online support to everyone wherever they are,” she said.

“I could have done this more strategically and efficiently from the beginning, but I was able to make the association as it is today because I pursued my belief even if someone criticized me for trying to help others when I could barely feed myself by working part-time jobs,” Okada said of her passion to demonstrate to teens through her own experiences that a strong will is what it takes to achieve their goals.

This section highlights the environment and a sustainable society. For more information on ESG and SDG issues, see [www.sustainable.japantimes.com/esg](https://www.sustainable.japantimes.com/esg)



## 125 years

125th anniversary special

### Times Capsule

Vol. 4: Film

## Reflecting the golden age of the silver screen

The Japan Times has long celebrated the pleasures of sitting in a dark theater and marveling at the actors on the silver screen.

Japan was an early adopter of cinema, which partially explains its precocious golden age of cinema, which produced the likes of Akira Kurosawa and Yasujiro Ozu, directors who would inspire a wide range of filmmakers.

Much of the overseas appreciation of Japanese cinema was nurtured by longtime JT contributor Donald Richie and continues to be fostered by foreign film writers such as Mark Schilling.

Over the decades, The Japan Times has reviewed hundreds of domestic and overseas films and spoken with dozens of film artists. The list includes Takashi Miike, Hirokazu Koreeda, Akira Kurosawa and many more.



The Times Capsule series will post topics related to sustainability that we have covered during the 125 years of The Japan Times.

Brand history & Archives

<https://sustainable.japantimes.com/brandhistory>

Sunday, Sept. 13, 1998: The Japan Times Timeout

**KUROSAWA**  
A lifetime pursuit of cinematic per

Sunday, March 29, 1987: The Japan Times

Dec. 8, 2013: The Japan Times On Sunday