

sustainable japan

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For 'water optimizer' company Brita, every drop counts

Roundtable

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Finding and defining a company's purpose is not an easy task, and once found, it is even harder for a company to keep that focus as it grows and evolves while trying to respond to consumer demands and the vagaries of the market. But for Managing Director Michael Magee and the team at Brita Japan, they know their North Star is to help create a more sustainable world.

"Since the company is so much about sustainability, it tends to attract people who are already quite sustainability-minded to begin with," Magee said. And it shows. From working on the Green Project, a reforestation at Mount Fuji done with an organization called Donguri no Kai, now 10 years running and originally conceived to preserve water runoff and the water table, as well as partnering with sustainability projects in the city of Kameoka west of Kyoto, sustainability is more than just company and employee branding — it is at the core of what Brita does.

With so many companies today claiming to be on the sustainability club guest list, how would Magee personally define success for Brita? Easy: "If you ask a consumer for some sustainable brands and Brita came out near the top of that list, that would be a good outcome."

Magee sat down with Ross Rowbury for The Japan Times Sustainability Roundtable's 19th iteration to explain what Brita is doing to get on that list.

Brita was founded in 1966 in Taunusstein, Germany, by the entrepreneur Heinz Hankammer, who had looked at existing water filtration systems and saw a need for providing water filtration to the consumer market. Brita, which according to Magee considers itself to be a "water optimizer" and now has a presence in over 70 countries, is perhaps best known to the Japanese consumer by its water jugs with built-in filtration systems. Brita's main function is to rely on the waterworks to supply the water, and then through its filter attachments optimize that water for the consumer by taking out any taste of residues such as chlorine.

An awakening in the forest

So how did Magee come to be working for Brita Japan, a company with sustainability at its core, while finding his own purpose along the way? It all began while growing up on Hokkaido, where Magee had the great opportunity to surround himself with nature, going camping, kayaking and hiking. While hiking in the forest, Magee often came across trash on hiking trails, leading him to recognize the contrast between the beauty of nature and its fragility when disregarded.

Despite Hokkaido's image of being an island of pristine forests and lakes, the



Michael Magee, managing director of BRITA Japan YUIKO TAIYA FOR PHOTOMATE

Japan of Magee's youth in the 1960s was also a nation racing to modernize and industrialize at any cost, and the country had few guardrails when it came to environmental regulations, especially with pollution. The town centers of Japan in Magee's youth were often heavily polluted, and rivers were sometimes toxic from industrial runoff. This juxtaposition between the pristine forests and lakes that Magee loved and the polluted town centers would later inform him about the

importance of optimizing sustainability in business and the importance of giving back.

Fighting marine plastic

Rowbury and Magee discussed the borderless problem of ocean plastic and how the growing awareness of its devastating effects on marine life is leading to a consumer revolution against too much plastic in everyday products, and how that awareness is putting consumers ahead

of the government in terms of action and regulation — as Rowbury put it, "an excellent example of consumers tending to become more apathetic about their democratic vote and turning to their 'dollar' vote."

Magee agreed, but still sees a role for government in solving issues such as ocean plastic and considers the issues even better served if business works in combination with government — what he calls "collective impact," in which different entities work together toward the same objective.

Magee gave the example of Brita working with Kameoka, the first city in Japan to ban plastic bags, in cleaning up the historic Hozu River, which once was polluted with plastic. In conjunction with the local government, Brita ran seminars on sustainability in high schools and worked with local movements for cleaning up the river. More recently, Brita has begun working with the Osaka Blue Ocean Vision, a prefectural initiative that includes dealing with the problem of ocean plastic.

Brita has developed a convenient lightweight water bottle that filters ordinary tap water into pure-tasting drinking water, avoiding the need to constantly buy water in unsustainable PET bottles and so saving both money and the planet. PET bottles, once considered a modern convenience, are now choking the world's waterways, contributing to ocean plastic or ending up in landfills — all while contributing to emissions of carbon dioxide.

Brita hopes to provide a more sustainable, cheaper and convenient solution with its portable filtration bottles. While its water jugs were designed to replace 2-liter water bottles, the filtration bottles are a lightweight and portable version designed to replace the ubiquitous 500-ml PET bottles bought from vending machines and stores. According to Magee, one replaceable filter in a Brita bottle can filter up 150 liters



Two of Brita's iconic consumer products: a water filter bottle and a jug YUIKO TAIYA

of water, replacing 300 PET bottles. That is 300 fewer plastic bottles possibly ending up in landfills, the environment or the ocean.

Taking the next small step

Magee conceded that Brita is a small company with only so much influence, but he referenced some of the conclusions published in its "Sustainability Reports," which it produces regularly, as to why he remains optimistic: "We specifically say that we don't agree that small steps don't count — we are a water company, so we believe that every drop counts, so it's important that even if it's not a world-changing move, to still take a step, and if everyone takes a step, it can lead to bigger things."

So what drives the team at Brita to keep taking these steps? Magee could only guess: "How much more exciting is it to tell your friends and family that you're working for a company that's changing the way they drink water sustainably, than saying you work at a water filtration company?"



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



Born and raised in Japan, Magee earned an MBA from the University of Michigan. He is bilingual, and has unique insights into Japanese culture.

YUIKO TAIYA FOR PHOTOMATE

Foundations step in to help women rebuild Tohoku

ESG/SDGs

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Ten years since the Great East Japan Earthquake triggered a powerful tsunami that devastated the Tohoku region, its effects continue to reverberate among the most vulnerable populations in the region.

The calamitous effects of the disaster are reflected in Tohoku's depopulation — a 40% decrease. Compounded by financial crises, it has fractured communities, leaving many people isolated in a deeply patriarchal environment that has become a breeding ground for violence against women, sexual minorities and children, incidents of which largely remain hidden.

Through the Reconstruction Agency, the Japanese government has supported many organizations dedicated to serving these populations. However, the agency recently announced it would reduce its annual budget by 93% during its next 10 years of operation. This dramatic cut has the potential to bring financial ruin to many organizations, thereby cutting off support to those who need it most.

In light of these circumstances, the United States-Japan Foundation and the Fish Family Foundation joined forces to provide a grant of ¥10 million (\$75,000) to six women-led organizations, with the aim of building a resilient Tohoku for the future. Launched in March 2021, this women-led project has facilitated direct support to vulnerable populations, such as the elderly, children and youths, single mothers and those experiencing disabilities. By providing opportunities for employment and education to enhance economic literacy, the project has also empowered populations and enabled them to establish long-term independence.

Since its establishment in 1999, the Boston-based Fish Family Foundation has focused on providing support to immigrants, at-risk youths and people struggling with mental health. The foundation has also actively supported areas affected by the Great East Japan Earthquake through grants to nonprofit organizations operating in the region. For its most recent grant dedicated to Tohoku, the foundation partnered with the United States-Japan Foundation, which was founded in 1980 to enhance ties between Americans and Japanese.

In 2006, the Fish Family Foundation and

its co-founder Atsuko Toko Fish established the Japanese Women's Leadership Initiative (JWLI), which, through its JWLI Fellows Program, has fostered emerging female leaders through hands-on experience and training sessions in nonprofit management and leadership development. In 2017, JWLI established the Champion of Change Japan Award, which recognizes women who address pressing needs in their communities. Since 2019, JWLI has also run a three-day bootcamp on entrepreneurial leadership with the purpose of accelerating social change in communities in Japan. The leaders of the six recipients of the grant are all JWLI alumni: three Champion of Change Japan Award finalists and three JWLI Bootcamp participants.

A major goal of this project has been to lay the foundations for collaborative partnership between grantees. During an online session held on April 28, the six grantees joined representatives of the Fish Family Foundation and the United States-Japan Foundation to report on their activities and discuss how they intend to utilize their new collaborative network to create a resilient Tohoku.

One of the grantees, Rera — which pro-



Grantees and representatives of the Fish Family Foundation and the United States-Japan Foundation at the online session held on April 28

FISH FAMILY FOUNDATION

vides transportation to the elderly and disabled to assist them in essential activities such as grocery shopping and hospital visits — utilized this collaborative network to strengthen its fundraising efforts while spreading awareness of its partners' activities. Yuka Takahashi, founder of Switch — an organization that provides skill training, career coaching and academic support — also touched on the benefits of the collaborative network. "Working together and learning about our specific strengths has led to discussions about how we can assist each other," she said. "This type of collective impact is something I hope to build going forward."

Regarding future collaboration, Shoko Monma, founder of Mia Forza — an organization focused on alleviating food insecurity — hopes to have other representatives of grantees speak to students at Aoba Joshi Gakuen, a junior high school for incarcerated girls in Sendai with which Monma frequently collaborates. "I would love for the women leaders gathered here to share their experiences with these students," she said. "It will surely expand their awareness of the choices available to them."

Junko Yagi, founder of Community Space Umineko, an organization focused on economic revitalization through job creation for the elderly, also expressed excitement

toward the future of their collaborative network: "It is so great that us coming together can bring happiness to many people, and I look forward to working with everyone into the future."

These sentiments were also expressed by Yoshie Kaneko, founder of Yappesu — an organization dedicated to transforming the lives of women by imparting knowledge and tools needed to become independent entrepreneurs — and Rika Hamade, founder of Imm Innovation, a nonprofit educational hub for women entrepreneurs.

Tomoyuki Watanabe, Japan representative of the United States-Japan Foundation, as well as Atsuko Fish, trustee of the Fish Family Foundation and founder of JWLI, also attended the online session. After listening to the discussions among grantees, Watanabe noted with great enthusiasm about how the network among grantees has deepened over the course of the project. In her closing remarks, Fish expressed her excitement toward the future of this collaborative network and her admiration toward the grantees' unrelenting optimism. "I believe the foundations being laid here represent just the beginning of something very big for the future," she said.

RIKA HAMADE

FOUNDER OF IMM INNOVATION



Prior to founding Imm Innovation in 2020, Rika Hamade successfully ran her own startup and coached over 200 women. Her organization is a nonprofit hub for female entrepreneurs in Tohoku that provides mentorship programs, workshops and pitching events. Her annual event in Tohoku to promote women's empowerment is one of the largest of its kind and has attracted up to 600 attendees. With the support of the new grant, her organization was able to focus on its empowerment program, centered on imparting information technology skills to 63 participants. Overall, her organization served 353 participants in the 2021 fiscal year. She is an alumnus of the 2019 JWLI Bootcamp.

2021 fiscal year. She is an alumnus of the 2019 JWLI Bootcamp.

YOSHIE KANEKO

FOUNDER OF YAPPESSU



Yoshie Kaneko is the founder of Yappesu, based in Ishinomaki, Miyagi Prefecture. Established in 2011, Yappesu works to transform the lives of women affected by the Great East Japan Earthquake by imparting the tools and knowledge needed to become financially independent entrepreneurs. She runs an incubator and community center to expand her women entrepreneurship program and accelerate innovation. In 2017, she received the Prime Minister's Award in recognition of her regional achievements. This year she handed off the reins of her organization in order to prepare for a run for the city council. She was a finalist of the 2017 Champion of Change Japan Award and is an alumnus of the 2019 JWLI Bootcamp.

2017 Champion of Change Japan Award and is an alumnus of the 2019 JWLI Bootcamp.

SHOKO MONMA

FOUNDER OF MIA FORZA



Drawing from her more than 25 years of experience working with vulnerable women and children, she founded Mia Forza, her most recent organization in Sendai in 2021.

Mia Forza, my strength in Italian, is a nonprofit that helps alleviate poverty among single-parent households and survivors of violence by operating a shelter, food pantry and a hotline.

With the support of this grant, Mia Forza assisted a total of 772 people — 505 children and 267 adults — through food pantries and other forms of food-related aid. She is an alumnus of the 2019 JWLI Bootcamp.

JWLI Bootcamp.

HIROKO MURASHIMA

FOUNDER OF RERA



Hiroko Murashima is the founder of Rera, situated in Ishinomaki. Established in 2011, Rera provides transportation to the elderly and those with disabilities to aid them in essential daily activities such as grocery shopping and visits to the hospital. Serving around 15,000 people every year, her service is a lifeline for those living alone, providing a crucial source of human connection. She often speaks on the topic of mobility as a service and is invited to lead workshops focused on training local leaders for policy changes. She was a finalist of the 2019 Champion of Change Japan Award and is an alumnus of the 2019 JWLI Bootcamp.

the 2019 JWLI Bootcamp.

YUKA TAKAHASHI

FOUNDER OF SWITCH



Yuka Takahashi is the founder of Switch, based in Sendai and Ishinomaki. Established in 2011, Switch aids people facing mental health challenges who have lost their will to learn, work or even live. Her organization is comprised of four centers from where she provides skill training, career coaching and academic support. With the support of this grant, she launched Note Cafe, an outreach initiative at public high schools where students can receive consultation and attend lectures in a comfortable environment. The organization visited high schools a total of 38 times and offered consultation to 99 students. She was a finalist of the 2019 Champion of Change Japan Award.

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JUNKO YAGI

FOUNDER OF COMMUNITY SPACE UMINEKO



Junko Yagi has decades of experience working with children in Ishinomaki and nearby Onagawa. Immediately following the Great East Japan Earthquake, she worked closely with single mothers, children, the elderly and other vulnerable populations at evacuation centers. In 2012 she founded Community Space Umineko, which runs a farm and cafe and contributes to economic revitalization through job creation for the elderly, women and youths. With the support of the grant, Yagi provided a plethora of inspiring opportunities for the elderly and youths to come together to create a wide array of crafts, such as flower aroma bags and bath mats, using a variety of materials. She is an alumnus of the 2019 JWLI Bootcamp.

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