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# sustainable japan

## At upcycled bag brand Plasticity, sustainability is style

### Roundtable

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Aki Saito hopes the fashion brand she created will be doomed by environmental progress — in fact, the company's tag line is "A brand that should disappear in 10 years." For this Tokyo-based designer and founder of the upcycled bag brand Plasticity, recycling and sustainability are at the core of her company's mission, and the millions of disposable plastic umbrellas discarded every year in Japan are her white whale — she catches what would normally be buried in landfills and upcycles it into individually unique high-quality and guilt-free fashion items.

Saito took time out from her busy schedule to sit down with Ross Rowbury for The Japan Times Sustainability Roundtable's 21st iteration to talk about how she began in fashion, what she has learned on her journey of discovery and why we don't need to make sacrifices to help save the planet — and can even do it in style. Rowbury began by asking how Plasticity got started and what it does.

### A way to contribute more

Saito's journey to creating Plasticity was as circuitous as the circular economy she so passionately believes in. After graduat-



Aki Saito, founder of Plasticity YUICO TAIYA FOR PHOTOMATE

ing from a university in England, the Tokyo native returned home and started work, but she soon found herself wondering whether she could contribute more. "I always spent time at home just making things and crafting," she explained. Her first foray into upcycling was when she transformed a faux-leather skirt into a bag, and realized she had found her passion. But how to contribute?

This led Saito back to school to learn the basics of bag-making — everything from using a sewing machine to how to follow a simple pattern. Around the same time, she had become very concerned about the environment and she wanted to find more environmentally friendly and sustainable materials. She investigated a few options, ranging from cork to nylon, but not satisfied they were truly sustainable, she decided to make her own material.

Walking around Tokyo one day thinking about her options, she realized she was surrounded by one hiding in plain sight: old umbrellas. Japanese, famous for their attachment to umbrellas, end up leaving or forgetting millions of unloved umbrellas at convenience stores, supermarkets, office buildings and on trains, all ultimately destined for landfills yet holding reams of plastic ready for repurposing. By some estimates, between 60 million and 100 million umbrellas are sent to



Saito and roundtable host Ross Rowbury at The Japan Times studios before the roundtable YUICO TAIYA FOR PHOTOMATE

landfills every year. Owing to disposable umbrellas' metal frames being directly attached to the plastic canopies, they are uniquely impractical and costly to recycle on a mass scale, so they often just end up as waste.

### A step to combat waste

Rowbury and Saito reflected on why Japan in particular seems to have so many discarded umbrellas. "Going to high school in Japan and then uni in England, I would just wear a hoodie around and wouldn't worry too much about a bit of rain," Saito said, "but in Japan, with a combination of manners and how convenient it is to buy an umbrella, they are just everywhere." They further discussed Japan's unique cultural habits of always using umbrellas as well as the sense of civic honesty of never daring to use a discarded-looking umbrella for fear it still has a rightful

owner.

Having the idea and the passion, Saito then had to deal with the reality of the manufacturing process. Her attempts at converting collected plastic canopies into a durable and nice-looking medium to work with proceeded by trial and error. She found that applying heat hardened the plastic, so in early experiments she set about ironing it under wax paper. Today, Plasticity's material is developed by heat-pressing four layers of umbrella plastic in a "press factory." Four layers "is about the ideal thickness to work with," explained Saito.

### Every item tells a unique story

Each Plasticity product is an individual, slightly unique in its own way, and each one tells a story about an umbrella's journey through time and space. Saito presented one bag as an example of Plas-

ticity's work, and Rowbury noticed a dark mark running through the material. This, Saito explained, was a rust mark indelibly conveying the age and abandonment of the original umbrella. As Saito pointed out, the more marked the material, the more interesting the story of the umbrella's journey. These unique marks subtly remind us that the bag once had a different life and different purpose, and let us wonder where it has been and how long it

sat until it was found and upcycled into a new product.

For Saito, there is method in the randomness. If the four layers come from two umbrellas with different colors, "maybe a light blue or a purple can be pressed to make a color, and I love that we are never able to tell how the materials will end up looking in the end, and that's the fun of upcycling." Each bag's unique lines and patterns are the product of random defects, traces of the weather it experienced or conditions it endured before coming to Plasticity for upcycling. For Saito, the irony is that the worse the condition of the original umbrella, the more interesting and unique the final product and the story it tells. "Just to imagine how long has this been used as an umbrella and the path that it's traveled to get to us, it's definitely something I think about," she said.



Handbags made out of upcycled plastic umbrellas YUICO TAIYA

### Mountain of opportunity

With Plasticity's rapid success, Saito is now working with a small team of designers and expanding their range. She no longer wanders the streets looking for abandoned umbrellas. Today, Plasticity buys its umbrellas directly from waste disposal companies, but it still only uses a tiny fraction of all the umbrellas discarded annually. "In our factory I saw a mountain of plastic stacked up, and that was just 3,000 umbrellas, so I just can't imagine — it's a crazy figure," she said. Saito is hoping to expand into other items while Plasticity continues to grow as a bag and accessories brand using the same material. "This material is hard to explain through images," Saito explained. "You really need to touch it."

As for the prospects of living up to the company's motto that it should no longer exist in 10 years, "Given the number of plastic umbrellas discarded annually, I want to explore — I have ideas, I need to start acting, and I do want to spend time thinking," Saito said. "Every age has a different problem."

PLASTICITY

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



## Kao nudges consumers toward a sustainable society

### Mission: Sustainability

OSAMU INOUE  
RENEWS



On June 29, Kao Corp. announced a new strategy that will have a strong impact: commitments to reduce its plastic packaging waste to net-zero by 2040 and then make it net negative by 2050.

Many companies have pledged to achieve carbon neutrality, reducing emissions of greenhouse gases from their business operations to net-zero. But a company announcing a commitment to reduce its waste to net-zero is rarely heard of. In fact, Kao is the first company to do so in Japan.

Kao's target for emissions reduction includes Scope 3, or indirect emissions from activities by the suppliers and users of a company's products, in addition to Scope 1 and Scope 2, which include emissions related to fuel and electricity used in production, making a clear commitment to achieve net-zero emissions for its supply chains and product life cycles as a whole.

Kao is no doubt a leader in sustainability as well as in environmental, social and governance-oriented (ESG) corporate management.

CDP, formerly the Carbon Disclosure Project, an international nonprofit organization that evaluates climate change measures taken by companies, annually releases "A Lists" of companies to which a high evaluation is awarded in the three areas of climate change, forests and water security. In 2021, only 14 out of 12,000 companies worldwide achieved triple As, included in the A List in all three areas. Kao was among them, achieving triple As for the second consecutive year.

Kao has been a pioneer when it comes to sustainability. In 2018, when the term "ESG" had yet to gain currency, the company reformed its internal structure, setting up an ESG managing committee and an ESG promotion meeting, a committee composed of division heads, thereby positioning ESG as the core of the company's management. Furthermore, this past April,

Kao launched ESG steering committees setting four priority themes — decarbonization, plastic packaging, human rights and DEI (diversity, equity and inclusion), and chemical stewardship — to further reinforce governance and effectiveness.

### Decarbonization and tech

Kao's work to reduce Scope 1 and 2 emissions has progressed steadily. Their combined total had dropped 20% by 2021, thanks to efforts to shift to renewable energy sources at its operational facilities. However, reducing Scope 3 emissions is not an easy task.

Scopes 1 and 2 represent 7% of Kao's greenhouse gas emissions. Most of the company's emissions are Scope 3, in which "raw material procurement" and "product use" represent 38.5% and 38.5%, respectively. Kao aims to reduce Scope 3 emissions by 22% through reductions across entire product life cycles.

### Net-zero plastic 'possible'

Kao has contributed to reducing the use of plastics by promoting refill and replacement products and increasing the degree of concentration of liquid products. For example, the company began selling refill products with highly concentrated liquid content in large-size film-based packaging at prices lower than bottled versions, encouraging consumers to develop the habit of refilling.

In 2020, Kao introduced in the United States the MyKirei brand of products sold in what it calls "air-in film bottles," or inflated film bottles, which have nearly halved the amount of plastic used in packaging.

In the same year, Kao announced it would eliminate eye-catching plastic stickers attached to product packages, an in-store sales promotion ploy used in Japan. This is proof that Kao prioritizes environmental measures ahead of sales or profits.

### The 'Kao Way'

Kao has a remarkable track record and has won a great reputation, but the head of its ESG division, David Muenz, is still not satisfied. "If what we really looked at is the initial successes that we have today, which are great... we've done a lot to make those things happen as an organization," said



The MyKirei brand of products are sold in "air-in film bottles." KAO CORP.

Muenz. "But I guess if I really searched in my soul, in my heart, I don't have a lot of satisfaction with where we are, probably because I see the distance we have to go yet — the tough journey that exists before us — and so I kind of remain hungry or driven to not accept where we are."

"Being seriously committed to sustainability is something that comes natural to Kao employees," added Junko Otani, vice president, ESG Global Strategy, Kao's ESG division.

### Causing lifestyle shifts

Decarbonization and plastic waste reduction will not be achieved for society as a whole unless we can change the behavior of consumers.

If Kao succeeds in changing the lifestyles of people through its efforts, making our society significantly more sustainable, the company will be able to create new markets. For Kao, sustainability is not something it talks about to make itself look good. It is a real issue on which its survival depends.

Kao knows it is not easy to change people's lifestyles. "Instead of trying to force consumers, we think it is important to gently nudge them to change lifestyles so they can make a smooth shift," Otani said. Ten years from now, hard plastic bottles may be gone from store shelves. Kao, at least, anticipates the possibility of this coming true.

Scan the QR code to read the full article about KAO's commitments to reduce its plastic packaging and emissions reduction.



## Unraveling Japanese companies

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AGC Inc. practices what I call ambidextrous development, in which the company aims to achieve growth by deepening existing businesses and at the same time exploring new business options. AGC's Vice President Shinji Miyaji said that what supports this is a corporate culture of choosing to take up difficult challenges and, by doing so, stimulating innovation to help the company contribute to society. This culture has been passed on since its foundation in 1907.

AGC prioritizes mainly two strategies. The first is business portfolio reforms. AGC initiated a major shift in its business structure in 2015. Currently it operates core business segments that serve as key earners — including glass, chemicals, displays and ceramics — and strategic segments serving as growth engines, including mobility, electronics and life sciences. The strategic segments have been growing steadily. The company expects they will overtake the core segments and represent a larger share of its consolidated operating profit by 2030.

The second strategy is the promotion of sustainability-oriented management. Under this strategy, the company has set the target of achieving net-zero carbon emissions by 2050 as a measure to address climate change and has worked to reduce greenhouse gas emissions through its products and technologies. As examples of specific efforts to achieve this, AGC is working to develop ammonia combustion technology and a shift in fuels to natural gas, as well as increase auxiliary use of electricity, aiming to reduce emissions of carbon dioxide from glass manufacturing.

"If you look at the situation from the global perspective," Miyaji said, "you can see that you need to manufacture materials using methods that have the least impact on the environment and in locations close to where they are consumed."

"As a leader in our industry, we are responsible for developing and introducing energy-saving production technologies to achieve this," he added.

AGC is looking at the possibility of

licensing its energy-saving technologies to third parties in the future so that they can find wider use.

The materials industry emits large amounts of greenhouse gases, but its products also are used to conserve the environment and keep our society sound and safe.

For example, the use of architectural insulating glass can directly reduce the consumption of energy for heating in winter. AGC claims such glass can reduce the amount of carbon dioxide emissions by 10 times more than those emitted from its production process.

Furthermore, homes with high insulating performance have only small differences in temperatures between rooms, which helps prevent such health hazards as death from heat shock and lung diseases stemming from condensation, according to the company.

Polyvinyl chloride resin is an indispensable



Shinji Miyaji, representative director, senior executive vice president and chief financial officer of AGC Inc. THE JAPAN TIMES

one of the largest of its kind. For many years, it has financially supported research efforts to find ways to resolve environmental issues.

A materials company generally needs five to 10 years to develop a new product. To develop a new business segment, it needs to initiate a long-term effort with a perspective spanning from 10 to 15 years. That means AGC's business portfolio reforms are yet to be completed. But they are "what we must do, at all costs" along with the effort to take its corporate culture to maturity, Miyaji said.



NAONORI KIMURA  
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A founding spirit that drives the aggressive pursuit of challenges and change: AGC's founding spirit is summarized in the slogan "Never take the easy way out, but confront difficulties." With this spirit permeating its corporate activities, AGC has been working on two management strategies diligently.

Generally speaking, it is today a company's responsibility to reshuffle its business portfolio in response to changes in the market and to maintain its competitive position. In the case of AGC, however, it is the corporate culture of purely preferring to take up challenges that drives the innovative evolution of its business portfolio.

Large companies tend to be biased toward maintaining the status quo, but AGC's view that change is nothing unusual, which is based on its founding spirit, has successfully worked to help it avoid this error. What I call the spirit of "and" can be cited as a symbol of the "confront difficulties" part of the slogan. AGC handles pairs of themes that typically do not sit well with each other straight on — including core segments that serve as main earners versus strategic segments to lead the company in the future, and economic value versus social value — which allows it to make impossible possible. This is sustainability-oriented management for AGC.

This section highlights the environment and a sustainable society. For more information please visit <https://sustainable.japantimes.com>

