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Japan’s plastic habit may open door for aluminum cans

Unraveling Japanese companies

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Although global awareness of plastic pollution has been growing rapidly in recent years, the issue seems less pressing to Japanese. Yet precisely because of this, the domestic market may have large potential for alternative containers — in particular, aluminum cans.

“Shifting from PET bottles to cans has now become a global trend. If the Japanese market sees the same phenomenon, I believe the demand for aluminum will grow further,” said Teruaki Nakatsuka, president and group CEO of Altemira Holdings, a vertically integrated group of aluminum can makers and other aluminum businesses, in a recent interview, part of a monthly series by Naonori Kimura, a partner for the consulting firm Industrial Growth Platform Inc.

Currently in Japan, plastic bottles are slightly preferred over aluminum cans. About 25 billion bottles are made from plastic annually, while 20 billion cans are made of aluminum and another 5 billion cans are produced from steel, according to Nakatsuka. “The situation is quite peculiar in Japan compared to other countries,” he said.



Nakatsuka outlines the global shift from plastic bottles to aluminum cans during an interview with Naonori Kimura.
HIROMICHI MATONO

Nakatsuka said Japanese people's favoring of PET bottles is based on a lack of deep understanding of the fact that the plastic could wind up polluting the environment. In addition, many believe that their efforts to recycle plastic bottles pay off, mitigating the negative impact on marine and land environments. But in fact, recycling has a limit, he said.

Another reason why major Japanese beverage companies are still selling drinks in plastic bottles is that they have already set up their own facilities to manufacture these bottles, he added.

As people around the world learn more and more about plastic waste flowing into oceans and threatening marine life, and about exposure to microplastics in humans that could lead to potential health issues, countries across the globe are moving to restrict the usage of plastic containers and wrapping.

Currently, merely 9% of the overall plastic waste in the world is widely believed to be recycled. The remaining is either incinerated, sent to landfills or thrown away and therefore could end up entering waterways and oceans.

Nakatsuka said Europe and the United States have already begun switching from plastic bottles to aluminum cans. At business meetings and conferences in these regions, attendees now receive water in cans or paper cups rather than plastic



Teruaki Nakatsuka, president and group CEO of Altemira
HIROMICHI MATONO

bottles.

One major recent symbolic move was a ban on single-use plastic at the 2024 Olympic Games in Paris as part of efforts to tackle the global plastic pollution crisis. Visitors refilled their own beverage bottles with tap water, while Coca-Cola — the American beverage giant that was a designated sponsor of the Paris Olympics — distributed its products in reusable plastic cups with a deposit.

The problem of plastic pollution in oceans and elsewhere has gone so far as to prompt some local governments abroad to take legal action against corporate giants. In the U.S., Coca-Cola and PepsiCo faced lawsuits in the past two years that claimed the soda and drink makers mislead consumers about their role in plastic recycling. Meanwhile, the state of California sued oil giant Exxon Mobil in 2024, accusing it of deceiving the public about the effectiveness of plastic recycling and the extent of plastic pollution.

Some experts note that plastic bottles can only be recycled into another plas-

tic bottles two or three times, as plastics degrade during the process of recycling, but glass bottles or aluminum cans can be recycled into another one repeatedly, as they are melted down into their base material. “If you think about the life cycles, aluminum has much less impact on the environment,” Nakatsuka said.

In addition to expectations that Japan can gain deeper understanding of recycling, the potential of the aluminum market in Japan is appealing because of the recent consolidation in the aluminum industry, which had been ripe for further business efficiency for a long time, he said.

Altemira Co. was established in July 2022. Under the initiative of the U.S.-based private equity investment company Apollo Global Management Inc., Altemira Co. renamed from Showa Aluminum Can Corp., Altemira Can Co. changed from Universal Can Corp. and three other companies — Hanacans JSC in Vietnam, the rolling, foil and extrusion company Sakai aluminum Corp. and MA Aluminum Corp. — were integrated as Aluminum Group Co.

Apollo expected the merger to afford the new aluminum group stronger power in price negotiations with major beverage makers. Unlike U.S. can giants, such as Ball and Crown, Japanese aluminum can makers in the past had a weaker position in the industry and failed to propose higher prices amid the long-lasting deflationary trend in Japan.

“After a period of deflation, moves of passing margins to prices were gradually starting in Japan,” propelled by the increasing prices for energy and raw materials, Nakatsuka said. The new group also gained synergy of procurement, he added.

When the newly consolidated company started, what its leaders featured first was setting a corporate purpose. “We kicked off our group by forming a purpose, as we were created from five different companies,” Nakatsuka said. The purpose is “With aluminum technology, a future with dreams.”

Creating a new company name was also important to Nakatsuka, he said. The name Altemira comes from the “al” in aluminum, “te” in technology and “mira” in the Japanese word “mirai,” meaning “future.” The corporate name shows their hope that the strong desire of the five group companies will strive toward “a bright future with aluminum.” The company website says, “As a specialized manufacturer of aluminum cans as well as rolls, foils, and extrusions, we are well versed in the appeal of aluminum which is quite sustainable material.”

At the launch of the new group, they also streamlined and updated the personnel management system. The major reform was ending the conventional seniority system and launching a globally adopted system that makes job descriptions central to human resource management.

Nakatsuka also sees business opportunities in other countries. “Our technology has gained a footing in Vietnam, and we’d like to find similar markets in the future whenever we have a chance,” he said.

NAONORI KIMURA
INDUSTRIAL GROWTH PLATFORM
INC. (IGPI) PARTNER



The Altemira group is an aluminum manufacturer formed through the integration of the aluminum divisions of Showa

Denko (now Resonac) and Mitsubishi Materials under Apollo Global Management Inc. in the United States. By combining the expertise of both groups and rebuilding a management foundation that emphasizes human capital, the company also positions its “high adaptability to sustainability” as a driver of corporate growth and profitability.

In Europe and the U.S., the shift from PET bottles to cans is gaining momentum, while Japan — with its high PET bottle recycling rate — currently presents a different picture. However, systems that reflect life-cycle carbon content in economic value are expected to spread globally, including in Japan, potentially triggering a game-changing shift. Nakatsuka notes that “aluminum’s superiority remains unshaken from the perspectives of resource circularity and ease of collection.”

Altemira’s vertically integrated rolling and can manufacturing not only underpins its competitiveness but also supports an efficient, reliable recycling network and the development of high-quality recycled cans, reinforcing its sustainability advantage.

For Altemira, corporate growth and the creation of a sustainable society are inseparable. With these two wheels turning together, the company aims to realize its “Dreamy Alumi-Life.”

New Logistics Consortium baton to accelerate trucking efficiency

ESG/SDGs

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Japan’s logistics industry is facing pressing challenges, including accelerating labor shortages and increasing need for addressing environmental issues. According to a report compiled by the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry in February 2023, if no countermeasures are taken, there could be a 34.1% shortfall in transportation capacity (equivalent to 940 million tons) by 2030.

The Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism issued guidelines to address these challenges in the “Comprehensive Logistics Policy Outline” for fiscal years 2021 to 2025, approved by the cabinet in June 2021. These guidelines cover supply chain optimization, countermeasures against labor shortages, structural reform of logistics and the establishment of a resilient and sustainable logistics network.

To accelerate concrete initiatives following these guidelines, the Logistics Consortium baton was established in November 2024 by 11 companies such as Seino Holdings Co. Ltd., a top transportation company and long-time member of The Japan Times Sustainable Network, insurance firms such as Tokio Marine Holdings Inc. and others. Its primary aim is to implement the pooling of resources through “multi-carrier relay transportation.”

The consortium’s initial two-month pilot project, starting next month, is the driver-change model, in which drivers will take turns transporting goods over a single route.



SEINO HOLDINGS

This should improve their working conditions and boost productivity by giving them shorter hours.

Prior to the project, the consortium first aggregated and analyzed data on 13,000 shipments operated by participating carriers — a first-of-its-kind initiative in Japan. By evaluating transportation routes, load ratios, operating hours and schedules, they identified trunk routes where relay transportation could improve efficiency. Discussions have also been held on how to create risk-sharing frameworks in the event of accidents and how to standardize operational processes.

Seino, headquartered in Gifu and in the logistics business for over 90 years, is an industry leader in sustainability and introduced relay transportation for some trunk routes ahead of the launch of the consortium. This allowed Seino to provide insights that helped identify operational challenges.

Seino has been making various efforts to reduce emissions of carbon dioxide, including the introduction of two trucks hooked together, a shift from diesel to electric, training drivers on energy-saving driving skills and adopting reusable pallets and packing materials. It has also been collaborating with other freight companies in initiatives to save on energy and workloads and believes the consortium will further expand cooperative relationships that enhance each other’s efficiency.

As part of baton’s first pilot project, Seino will collaborate with Fukuyama Transporting Co. Ltd. on relay transportation between Fujisawa in Kanagawa Prefecture and Sakai in Osaka Prefecture. Meitetsu Transportation Co. Ltd. and Tonami Transportation Co. Ltd. will handle another route, between Higashi Osaka and Kasai in Tokyo, by relay transportation. Through this project, baton will evalu-



On Nov. 20 the Logistics Consortium baton held a joint press conference to announce its initiatives.
SEINO HOLDINGS

ate the handover of trucks and handling of cargo at driver changeover points and will also examine driver movements between changeover points, responses to irregularities such as delays and the need for parking arrangements.

After the project is completed and reviewed, baton plans to expand the relay network, create a common database for its operations and develop applications for operators and algorithms to combine services.

However, Seino, based on its preexisting experience and expertise in relay transportation, believes that achieving higher efficiency in logistics in a true sense requires the cooperation of a greater number of diverse stakeholders to achieve smoother and safer operations, enhance safety, develop and maintain relay hubs and systems to manage the entire operation, and manage health and labor issues. To create a holistic framework that covers all these elements, it is necessary to gather companies specialized in each field, and the consortium is considering the phased expansion of participating companies.

Already, not only logistics operators but also logistics facility operators and developers, IT companies, health care service providers and leasing companies have shown interest in the initiative, and discussions have begun for future collaborations.



Factelier: Revitalizing Japan’s manufacturing culture

Sustainable Japan Award: Satoyama Grand Prize

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“We want to help keep a cycle in which makers are properly recognized and rewarded going,” said Toshio Yamada, the CEO of Lifestyle Accent Inc., the Kumamoto-based company behind the apparel brand Factelier. Lifestyle Accent was named the Grand Prize winner in the satoyama category of The Japan Times Sustainable Japan Award 2025.

Yamada grew up in a family that has run a clothing store in a shopping district of Kumamoto for more than a century. Even as large retailers and fast fashion expanded, the store endured, he recalls, because it had built relationships in which customers chose to buy not simply because of what was sold, but because of whom they were buying from.

Watching his parents at work from an early age, Yamada gradually came to internalize a simple belief: that clothing has the power to change, even if only slightly, how people face the day ahead.

The domestically produced share of Japanese apparel brands, which stood at around 50% in 1990, is estimated to have declined to about 1% by 2025. Factories responsible for fabric production and sewing have rarely been visible, leaving limited opportunities for makers to be properly recognized. While brands and trading companies have posted strong business results, many manufacturing sites have remained



CEO of Factelier Toshio Yamada, visiting partner factories in Japan
FACTELIER

at or near minimum-wage levels. Yamada found this imbalance troubling, sensing that gratitude and value were not circulating in a balanced way within the industry.

A turning point came when Yamada went to France at 20 to study design. While working at Gucci’s Paris boutique, he came to realize that iconic brands such as Gucci, Hermes, Chanel and Louis Vuitton all originated in factories and ateliers. For Yamada, who until then had viewed the industry largely from a retail perspective, his time in France marked the first moment he confronted the act of making — and the people behind it — head-on.

“It was there that I truly learned what it means to respect the people who make things,” Yamada said. He began to see building globally respected brands from Japan as work worthy of a lifetime’s commitment.

It was from these convictions that Factelier was born. Developed by Lifestyle Accent, Factelier is an apparel brand whose products are all made in Japan. The brand is defined by timeless, understated designs meant to be worn for years, with careful attention paid to pattern-making — central to comfort — as well as to fabrics and silhouettes that resist wrinkling and maintain their shape through repeated washing. “What matters most to us is whether a garment helps the wearer straighten up, both mentally and physically,” Yamada said.

What sets Factelier apart is its production and sales model. The brand works directly with highly skilled factories across Japan, carrying out every stage of production domestically, from fabric development to sewing. Each product clearly identifies the factory responsible for its manufacture, and prices are set by the factories themselves. Central to this approach is a commitment to enabling factories to fully leverage the skills and strengths they have cultivated over time, and to express that value directly through the prices they determine.

Sales are conducted primarily online, supported by physical bases in Tokyo and Kumamoto, where fitting samples are made available. By keeping intermediary costs low, the company has built a structure that allows value to be returned more fairly to those who make the products.

As the model has continued, some partner factories have begun increasing the share of production devoted to their own



Toshio Yamada
FACTELIER

brands. Alongside improved profitability, this shift has helped create more stable operations, enabling factories to maintain production even during slower periods.

Bringing products to market under their own names has also had a positive effect on motivation on the factory floor. Yamada says he is beginning to see tangible signs that craftsmanship, earnings and a sense of pride are starting to come together.

In recent years, this approach has expanded beyond the boundaries of the apparel industry. In a collaboration with Karimoku Furniture, one of Japan’s leading furniture makers, Factelier has produced stools made from oak that would otherwise have been discarded due to pest damage, as well as wooden hangers crafted from thinned timber. The initiative represents an effort to assign new value to domestically sourced wood that has not been fully utilized.

Creating a cycle in which makers are fairly recognized and rewarded, Yamada says, is not an extraordinary act, but an essential one — like quietly illuminating a corner of society. “If there is even one person in a class who seems a little down, you reach out and speak to them,” he said. “I think that’s simply the natural thing to do.”

• **FACTELIER**

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