

# sustainable japan

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Japan President James Aquilina says company is fashioning a global legacy

## Estee Lauder Cos. invests in local communities

### Name: James Aquilina

Title: Executive Officer and president, Estee Lauder Companies Japan

URL: <https://www.elcompanies.com/en/>

Hometown: New York  
Years in Japan: 4

### Leaders & Readers

MIKA OSAKI

CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Glamour, fantasy and excess often come to mind when one thinks of the luxury beauty industry. While this side is the most visible, behind such gorgeous images at the Estee Lauder Cos. lies a very real, grounded ethos that guides their heart and soul. One of the greatest investments they make is pouring back into the communities that love their brands. Not only do they champion multiple thoughtful causes that support women's and girls' advancement in health, education, and entrepreneurship, and the LGBTQIA+ communities, but their commitment to reducing their carbon footprint led them to open their first Asia-Pacific manufacturing and engineering facility in Japan. Manufacturing products closer to consumers cuts down on fossil fuels needed for transportation, reduces waste in the supply chain, customizes research and development for the Asian market and supports local vendors.

In a sit-down with ELC Japan's Executive Officer and President, James Aquilina, he discussed the efforts being made locally to support social and environmental initiatives. By remaining true to the engine behind the

Estee Lauder Cos. — the people who support them — Aquilina personifies the legacy of inclusion, respect and sustainability that defines the company's moral compass.

Originally from New York, Aquilina's career in the luxury beauty industry has taken him to the Americas, Europe, the Middle East, Africa and now the Asia-Pacific region. He moved to Japan in 2022 with his family to head ELC Japan. Many consumers don't realize that their favorite beauty brands — MAC, Clinique, Jo Malone London, La Mer, Aveda and more — fall under the Estee Lauder Cos. umbrella.

"Our sustainability commitment is focused on how our business can drive social and environmental impact. It's not sustainability as a pillar, it's about how sustainability is integrated into business impact over time, and how one fuels the other," he said. Aquilina does not view social causes and sustainability initiatives as side projects, but rather as core parts of the Estee Lauder Cos. ecosystem.

Aquilina points to the MAC Viva Glam campaign as a shining example. Founded in 1994, 100% of sales for Viva Glam products are donated to support gender and racial equality or HIV and AIDS care, and the campaign has begun expanding to environmental sustainability causes. The campaign has raised over \$540 million for various nonprofits and support organizations since it began. MAC's early commitment to funding HIV/AIDS care in 1994 was far ahead of its time, and its subsequent expansion into broader social causes has helped cement MAC as a trailblazer in supporting the LGBTQIA+ community.

Estee Lauder Cos. also champions its

own breast cancer campaign, founded by Evelyn H. Lauder, the daughter-in-law of Estee Lauder herself. Since 1992, it has raised more than \$156 million, which has been used to fund research, education and medical services around the world. Their brands also support Estee Lauder Cos.' Breast Cancer Campaign with Pink Ribbon products, special items whose proceeds raise funds for the Breast Cancer Research Foundation. The Estee Lauder Cos. social impact missions, led in Japan by Aquilina, to "invest in and empower our consumers," show that building up customers' communities doesn't just impact these groups, it builds a global legacy. "As a company that is growing and successful, you have a commitment to your community," he said. "Our commitment is to the local community, supporting social, health and environmental wellness. Your investments will fuel more success, and your success will fuel more investments. It's truly circular."

In addition to its admirable commitment to social impact causes, Estee Lauder Cos. also goes to great lengths to minimize its environmental impact in product packaging, retail store resource usage, manufacturing and overall carbon footprint. Rather than leaning into the norm by relying on layers and layers of plastic and excessive packaging, Aquilina speaks to the clever leveraging of the Japanese love of simplicity and efficiency. "Luxury is not always more," he said. Consumer expectations are also evolving toward a more holistic perspective in which the values behind brands and products matter more and more and, because of this, the retail stores are also thoughtfully designed to minimize environmental impact.



HARUO MOTOHASHI

One of the most impressive efforts made to take more ownership of the end-to-end manufacturing process has been to expand production to Japan. Not only does this reduce fossil fuel usage and waste associated with transportation, but it also gives more control over the sourcing of materials by leveraging local craftsmanship in product development.

A great example of this is the award-winning Estee Lauder Aqua Charge. Its formula involves a rice ferment that was discovered in the sixth-generation, 170-year-old Yushin sake brewery. "It's really a delight to be able to meet with the family and understand their values, and how we can be in protec-

tion and in respect of that," said Aquilina.

The Sakura manufacturing campus was also built with environmental impact in mind: It is solar-powered, recycles water and has LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certification. Opening a manufacturing plant in Japan, close to consumer demand, supports sustainability efforts in the region. It also allows R&D to be tailored to the needs of Asian consumers.

Estee Lauder Cos. also rewards customers with programs like the Le Labo perfume refills. Craft perfume is fresh-blended at the store, reducing transportation waste. Once a bottle is empty, it is refillable at Le Labo stores for a 20% savings. This directly incen-

### Hiking, skiing, time with family

Originally from New York, James Aquilina's career has taken him all over the world. He has spent a total of 20 years with the Estee Lauder Cos. in various positions, and has previously worked in the Americas, Europe, the Middle East and Africa.

In 2022, he relocated to Japan with his wife and children to take on the role of executive officer and president. In his free time, he enjoys traveling to different parts of Japan, hiking, skiing and spending time with his family. He feels a personal connection and pull to recharge in nature, finding it restorative.

tivizes customers not to throw bottles away. "It's great to be able to pass on these savings to consumers to encourage waste reduction."

Globally, Estee Lauder Cos. also aim to reduce their carbon footprint across manufacturing sites in key areas such as energy, water usage and packaging. Since 2020, they have been able to convert to 100% locally sourced renewable energy. They have collectively reduced their water usage by 41%, and 72% of their packaging is "refillable, reusable, recycled or recoverable," according to the companies' Social Impact & Sustainability Report for fiscal 2025.

When asked if there was one thing Aquilina would like his customers to remember about his views on sustainability and social impact, he said, "Our success is a responsibility to bring a positive impact to everyone we touch, including our consumers, employees and communities." Whether it's investing in the physical community's well-being by reducing the company's carbon footprint, spotlighting partnerships with local vendors and manufacturers or creating incentives and programs that customers can participate in to contribute to social projects and waste reduction, Aquilina sees all of it as a sustainable ecosystem. "When those things work in synergy, we can have a great, responsible connection."

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The Japan Times Co. Ltd. launched the ESG Consortium and the Satoyama Consortium in 2017 and merged them into the Sustainable Japan Network in 2021, focusing on individuals, companies and organizations active in various positions to realize a sustainable society, including key people in Japan and overseas who disseminate their efforts both domestically and abroad.

The first Satoyama and ESG Awards were held in 2019. Three years later, the name changed to the Sustainable Japan Award, with both a satoyama section and an ESG section established within it. Our goal is to commend individuals, companies and organizations who have made advances in sustainability efforts, and we hope to convey their activities both domestically and internationally.

Apply



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## Yamagata Symphony Orchestra plays part in community synergy

### Satoyama-Authentic Japan

MAIKO MURAOKA  
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Yamagata, the city selected in 2025 as the first Destination Region — a Japanese municipality The Japan Times wishes to tell the world about — is home to the first professional orchestra in the Tohoku region.

The Yamagata Symphony Orchestra was founded in 1972, driven by the passion of conductor Chiaki Murakawa to bring authentic music to the children of Yamagata.

In a recent interview with The Japan Times, Executive Director and Secretary-General Hideki Nishihama, who has been involved in the orchestra's management since 2015, said he did not know much about Yamagata until he was invited to one of the orchestra's concerts in 2012.

As a longtime fan of orchestral music and having previously served as director and secretary-general of the Kansai Philharmonic Orchestra, based in Osaka, Nishihama had of course heard about the Yamagata Symphony Orchestra. "But it was when I actually saw the orchestra perform in Osaka that I became particularly aware of Yamagata," he said. The concert he saw was Osaka's first "Sakuranbo (Cherry) Concert," a series that began in 2003 at the Tokyo Opera City Concert Hall and is always accompanied by a trade fair showcasing Yamagata specialty products such as cherries.

Recognized for his success in restructuring the orchestra in Osaka between

2003 and 2011, Nishihama was offered his current position at the Yamagata Symphony Orchestra in 2014. Before deciding whether to accept, he visited Yamagata for the first time. It was February, and snow fell on him as soon as he started walking down a deserted street. However, once he stepped into the concert hall, he was amazed to see a crowd gathered to watch a performance. It was then that he recognized the level of appreciation that the people of Yamagata had for the arts.

Nishihama said another great thing about Yamagata is how close people and things are to each other, thanks to the city's compactness. For regional cities and events to attract people, it is often important to constantly try new things and ideas. "But I don't just have ideas flowing out of my brain. It is the close connections and communication with various people — a benefit of being in a small city — that generate new ideas and energy," he explained.

Close connections with people also enable quick decision-making. Several years ago, when Nishihama learned that a local department store had gone bankrupt and in just two days the community would hold an event aimed at revitalizing the area, he sent a message to Mayor Takahiro Sato via a social networking service saying that an orchestra's value lies in participating in such events as a symbol of the community. Two days later, the mayor and members of the orchestra were standing on the stage in the square outside the store, livening up the event. "To truly bring out the value of meaningful work, the energy of the people in that place and the connections between them

are what matter most," Nishihama said.

He also believes that the physical proximity of things and places can transform the entire city into a place where visitors can enjoy exploring. He pointed out that the city is home to various historic



Yamagin Kenmin Hall

buildings and cultural properties, especially pseudo-Western structures built in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, including the Bunshokan, a local history museum. The city also has various cultural facilities, including Yamagin Kenmin Hall, one of the orchestra's home venues. The hall opened in 2020 and receives approximately 900,000 visitors annually, making it a flagship cultural facility of the city.

Another home venue is Yamagata Terasa Hall, which will host a concert featuring the orchestra with renowned Lithuanian conductor and violinist Julian Rachlin in July. Next January will see the return of Clelia Cafiero, a promising Italian conductor who recently made her debut at the renowned German opera house Semperoper Dresden. "Clelia Cafiero made her Japanese debut at our hall," Nishihama said.

"Isn't it exciting to think that our hall in Yamagata could become a hub for global exchange?" Nishihama said. "If you drop a single drop of water, in Tokyo the ripples disappear almost immediately, but in Yamagata they keep spreading and linger on," he added, convinced that small regional cities like Yamagata are full of possibilities.

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Destination Region 2025  
Yamagata city



A performance of Puccini's opera "Tosca" as part of the Concert Opera Series III by the Yamagata Symphony Orchestra at Yamagin Kenmin Hall. DAIKI GOTO