

## **A Survey of Japanese TV Commercials in the Past Ten Years**

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About ten years ago when I took part in the 4th International Conference on Cross-Cultural Communication held in San Antonio, Texas, I presented a paper entitled "A Study of Japanese TV Commercials from Socio-cultural Perspectives" (Akiyama 1993). At that time I raised the following twenty features of Japanese TV commercials:

1. Smiling to express happiness and satisfaction by using the product or service (including Japanese smiling).
2. Close-ups of women, especially those of actresses, singing idols, movie stars, TV talents frequently appear instead of informing about the content or effectiveness of the product.
3. Gestures (emblems) which are originally Japanese or American, or both often appear as effective means of communication. Proximity is also used for expressing emotional closeness.
4. "Soft sell" approaches as opposed to "hard sell" commonly appear.
5. Inconsistency between the visual image and the product or service.
6. Frequent appearance of TV personalities.
7. Using trained animals, attractive people, and children.
8. Frequent appearance of foreigners.
9. Use of music to improve the image.
10. Frequent use of concepts in which tradition and modernity combine to produce a beautiful contrast.
11. The use of foreign languages, especially English and French.
12. Frequent use of puns.
13. The frequent use of the concept of "family" is often a center of advertising concept.
14. Public advertising or public service announcements are rare.
15. Comparative or challenge advertising is rare.
16. Advertising of alcoholic beverages and tobacco is often broadcast; the former is very common, but the latter is somewhat restricted.
17. Frequent appearance of mini-dramas or stories.
18. Insurance companies, securities companies, and banks are allowed to make TV commercials, however, adequate information is not offered.
19. Except for discount stores, supermarkets, and fast food, indication of price is rare.
20. Shortening of the time of commercial broadcasting: 15 seconds or 30 seconds.

Comparing these features of Japanese TV commercials with American equivalents, I summarized five particular characteristics of Japanese advertising.

- (I) Language only plays subsidiary role in communication. In other words, language is only a strand in the communication network.
- (II) Commercial producers, sponsors, and the audience prefer the soft sell approach. Nonverbal communication is frequently used and displayed on TV.
- (III) The Japanese ethical system which values "harmony" and "modesty," frowns upon comparative or challenge advertising, though recently the circumstance has somewhat changed.
- (IV) The commercials frequently employ foreigners as well as foreign languages, including nonsensical English and ungrammatical English for the purpose of creating an exotic mood or improving the image.

By watching and analyzing the commercials broadcast over the past ten years, features and characteristics of the Japanese TV advertising seems to have changed much. As the roles of TV advertising have been getting not the only means of announcing new products and services by the amazing development of Internet, even Japanese TV commercials must have been trying to adjust the need and trend of Japanese people. The followings features are recent developments of Japanese TV commercials.

1. Abundant broadcast of commercials related to consumer credit agencies, health insurance companies, and banking services. They explicitly inform people about the convenience and readiness of their services.
2. Appearance of American gestures, e.g. "thumb(s) up (approval)," "thumb(s) down (disapproval)," "shrug one's shoulders (I have no idea, I don't know)," and "stick up a thumb, an index finger and a little finger (I love you)," etc.
3. Frequent appearance of automobile commercials.
4. Increase of the words on the TV screen; in some commercials, the words and phrases are shown and read simultaneously.
5. Constant use of BGM (background music) in commercials. Popular songs and music are used for improving product image and familiarity.
6. Advertising of alcoholic beverages like beer, sake, "shochu", wine and whisky, etc. is abundantly broadcast and this trend has been increasing.
7. JA (Japan Tobacco Company) significantly reduced its TV advertising, having reappeared in the print media, including fliers in trains or ads in newspapers. The strategy for consumer appeal has completely changed from "hard sell" to "soft sell". The manners of smoking are emphasized, deemphasizing the sale of cigarettes.
8. Advertising during the "TV shopping time" or "Net shopping time" has been increasing drastically. Especially, subsidiary healthy foods or equipment for dieting and being in good shape frequently appear on TV screen.
9. Comparative ads and challenging ads have begun to seen on TV, however, their appearances are still very rare.
10. Due to the unexpected proliferation of Internet and cell phones, the insertion of "http://www.ABC" and toll free phone number "0120-DEF" frequently appear at the bottom of the TV screen.

- 11 TV personalities and celebrities like movie stars, singers, and idols often appear on TV commercials to increase familiarity of the goods and services through their characters.
- 12 Recently, foreigners appear much less on TV commercials than ten years ago, yet they still often promote products and services for cosmetic companies and brand goods
13. Interest in ecology is frequently reflected in TV commercials or public service announcements like "Save energy," "Keep the environment," "Avoid drunk driving," and "Plant trees in the tropics and desert," etc.
14. English and sometimes French words and phrases often appear on TV and they are spoken at the same time. Catch phrases in English are abundantly used. They are used for the sales of both international and domestic products and services.
15. The use of computer graphics and animations are abundantly used on TV for improving the images of the companies.
16. Generally speaking, the time of advertising has been lengthened; A spot lasting 30 seconds is the mainstream now and 60 second spots occasionally appear.
17. The advertising of cellular phone companies has drastically increased in reflection of their popularity. Comparative ads are often used in a "soft sell" manner.
18. A "Hard sell" instead of the "soft sell" approach is becoming common. The same names and phrases are repeated over and over again.
19. The use of animals, babies, and children (the ABC approach) is often seen on TV.
20. The concept of "family" is often at the center of advertising; in summer they are enjoying a barbecue or beer party, and in winter they are eating pot-cooked dishes round the "kotatsu" (a Japanese electric foot warmer) or table.

Among these features, ten outstanding features like Nos. 1, 4, 6, 9, 13, and 18 are worth mentioning and explaining in detail. They are new aspects and scenes of Japanese TV commercials.

As for the feature of No. 1 and No.4, consumer credit companies like "Aiful", "Promise", "Acom" and "Takefuji," etc., have been showing their ads on TV, creating competition among them. The number of advertisements of "Aiful" and "Promise" and "Acom" are specifically abundant and they are favorites among TV viewers, although borrowing money from these companies might be dangerous because of their higher interest rate. Their advertisements might be thought of as belonging to the category of "hard sell" approach from the viewpoint of American. Their advertisements appear mainly at night. And the strategy is the combination of the "soft sell" and "hard sell" in Japan. "Aiful" has been making a series of commercials in which TV idols or TV actors appear in humorous situations, showing comical performances with longer or smaller letters of explanations and access to the company. For example, a TV actor is struggling for a good shape or for a perfect job while a chihuahua dog is standing there watching him steadily with a board hanging from his neck saying "*Baransu wo taisetsu ni*" (Be aware of the good balance). It is a kind of pun; balance of his good shape or a job and balance of the budget. The catch phrase with music goes like, "*Doo suru? Aiful!*" (What do you do? The answer is just *Aiful!*) His facial expression changes from self-confidence to regret. Then the catch phrase is inserted. The "Acom" advertisement takes a different angle. Idols nowadays play a big part, showing a smiling face,

making silly mistakes. The ad shows the details of the contracts which are virtually impossible to read in Japanese in such a short span of time.

In contrast with the commercials of consumer credit companies, the advertising of health insurance companies are taking "hard sell" approach even showing bigger letters and figures in the ad. Usually a man in a doctor's uniform explains the merits of the contracts, which would attract consumers' willingness to take out a policy. This approach of advertising is quite new and novel in Japan while it has been quite common in the United States for some time.

Concerning the feature No. 6, there are no laws or regulations restricting commercials of alcoholic beverages on TV. Therefore, in summer advertisements show time drinking beer dynamically with the expression of satisfaction "Uh-huh, great!" In winter "sake" advertising is abundantly broadcast and the actor/actress often gives a sigh of contentment and his or her enjoyment. In the United States these types of TV advertisements are strictly regulated to avoid teenager and adult drunk driving. Only recently in Japan have the phrases like "Drinking alcohol is not allowed under 20 years old" or "Drunken driving is heavily penalized," been inserted in small letters on the TV screen. In addition, campaigns for reducing "drinking and driving" have started in public announcement of the AC (Advertising Commission). The "Soft sell" approach is still applicable to alcoholic advertising in Japan. Atmosphere and mood are valuable.

As for No. 7, JA (Japan Tobacco Co.) has shown us many smoking advertisements on TV since the public corporation changed into private one. However, during the past two years, all TV advertising of cigarette has disappeared. Instead, now, we can see the fliers of smoking cigarettes on trains. The strategy has changed into appealing to the morality or manners of cigarette smokers. For example, "A lit cigarette is carried at the height of a child's face," "Sometimes people stub out their cigarettes on a wall. Are they trying to write a message?" The catch copy is "Meet Your Delight." They are very "soft sell" advertisements. They don't say anything about the danger of passive or active smoking on our health. This approach was banned in the U.S. more than twenty years ago.

Feature No. 9 reflects the Japanese people's mentality of mutual dependence. We have an anecdote in which we give out a basic necessity to the enemy in cases of emergency. Under such value, it is very difficult to make comparative or challenge advertisements. At best, comparing a company's product or service with the other company can be accepted. However, recently, comparing the products and services with that of another company have appeared on TV. In this case, reference to the competitor is only made by sentences (utterances) like "*Tasha-hi*" (mentioning the comparison by way of "others"). We can find more epoch-making advertising in the competition fields of telephone companies, airlines, etc. They often use roundabout ways of mentioning a product or a service in a "soft sell" approach. It indicates that the Japanese cannot do away with the spirit of mutual existence as their aesthetics.

Concerning No. 13, Japanese TV stations only recently have begun broadcasting public announcements for various kinds of problems. The U.S. has been running far ahead of Japan for the advertising. Some examples of the Japanese public announcements are "Avoid Drunken Driving," "Save Energy," "Produce clean energy by solar or wind power," "Planting trees in tropical areas and deserts," "Organ donation," etc. Dangers of smoking cigarettes are not broadcast on TV as often as other public service announcements.

No. 18 is worth mentioning in order to contrast the "hard sell" to the "soft sell" approach. As is mentioned above, the "soft sell" approach is more common in Japanese commercials than the U.S. For Japanese people "tacit knowledge" and "high context dependence" are considered valued means of communication. Therefore, the names of products and services are often not repeated in Japanese advertisements. Instead, beautiful scenery and music, etc. are inserted in TV advertisements. So, the common phrases in American English like "Where is the beef?" for a U S hamburger chain and "Nothing beats the real thing," and narrated "Coke is it." for beverages etc. are not familiar in Japan, though the products have been available in Japan for many years.

Looking back on the features above and considering their characteristics, I have concluded the following points which are particularly important for understanding Japanese TV advertising.

- (I) The importance of language has gradually grown as a means of communication in advertising, though the step is still very little by little. Language has become one of the strands in communication network.
- (II) The "Hard sell" approach has become more popular in the field of Japanese advertising. Although, it is still eclipsed by the more popular and effective "Soft sell" approach. Only life insurance and auto insurance companies are applying the "hard sell" American approach to their advertising,
- (III) The Japanese values of "harmony" and "modesty" are still dominant in the field of TV advertising. The Japanese government has been encouraging a free-trading market. However, only a few international companies are following the guidelines.
- (IV) About ten years ago, in TV advertisement at prime time, many foreigners, most of them were Caucasian males/females, actors/actresses, movie stars, celebrities, singers, etc. appeared in the TV screen. However, using foreigners for Japanese TV commercials has been drastically decreased. That is, Japanese people seem to be getting out of adoration of foreign beauties and longing for foreign goods services,
- (V) Background music is still very common because companies and musicians like tie-up advertising very much. This is a very important element in the "soft sell" approach in Japan.

In conclusion, by analyzing and explaining Japanese TV commercials from socio-cultural perspectives and comparing them with their American counterparts, I have raised five characteristics worth mentioning. Japanese TV commercials that I used for my analysis are more than one thousand and I can safely say that Japanese TV commercials began following American TV commercials about ten years ago. However, the methods and spirit of making them are still continuing. For my concluding remark, I would like to say that Japanese TV stations, TV advertising markets, clients, and, of course viewers should watch the trends of the consumers carefully so that the viewer can distinguish TV advertising from unprofitable, falsehood, and false persuasion. I would like to make every effort to investigate Japanese TV commercials later on. And I will present a more detailed paper for the 12th International Conference on Cross-Cultural Communication which will be held in San Antonio, Texas, in the summer of 2006.

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