GENERALIST PR IN JAPAN: A RELATIONSHIP-CENTERED TRADITION

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Shaped by a strong tradition of generalist communication roles, long-term stakeholder relationships, and close identification with the organization, corporate communication in Japan has traditionally emphasized continuity, coordination, and relationship building. As Japanese companies operate in an increasingly globalized and rapidly changing communication environment, this traditional emphasis faces new demands but remains influential in the communication function. Drawing on insights from Professors Koichi Yamamura (Akita International University) and Yusuke Ibuki (Kansai University), as well as Tsutomu Igaki, Managing Executive Officer responsible for sustainability, brand, stakeholder engagement, and communications at OMRON Corporation, this article explores the key characteristics of Japanese corporate communication and considers how tradition and change are influencing its future.

THE CURRENT STATE OF CORPORATE COMMUNICATION

Japan at a glance

- **Political system:** Constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary system of government
- **Capital:** Tokyo
- **Population:** Approx. 122.3 million people, spanning 377,975 km^2
- **Language:** Japanese
- **Main religions:** Shintoism, Buddhism, and Christianity
- **Key industries:** Automobiles, consumer electronics, computers, and other electronics

Building communication expertise from within

In many Japanese companies, becoming a communication professional does not necessarily start with communication. Employees typically join companies as generalists and may move through several functions before taking on responsibility for corporate communication. By the time they arrive in a communication department, their expertise is shaped by the company they work for, the functions they have experienced, and the relationships they have built along the way. This is what Koichi Yamamura, a communication consultant and Select Professor at Akita International University, and Yusuke Ibuki, Professor at Kansai University, refer to as "generalist PR."

The roots of generalist PR lie in established HR practices: generalist recruitment of new graduates, job rotation, on-the-job training, and long-term employment. There is an obvious advantage to this approach. Communication

practitioners are not outsiders interpreting a business they barely know. They have often worked in it themselves. Their internal networks can make it easier to gather information and to form an understanding of the company's businesses beyond the communication field. This understanding can extend to management and to broader societal trends related to the company's businesses. Such knowledge can help ensure PR activities are grounded in a deep understanding of the company's business environment.

At the same time, practitioners may have less formal PR education than their counterparts in countries where communication is a clearly defined academic and professional entry field. Formal academic training in PR remains relatively limited in Japan. While a number of universities offer PR-related courses, Yamamura and Ibuki note that many provide only one or two courses, while integrated PR education is offered by relatively few institutions, often within marketing or communication studies.

The media landscape

This deep understanding of the company and its environment also extends to the media landscape in which Japanese companies operate. Yamamura and Ibuki point to the importance of personal relationships with key reporters and to the structure and function of "kisha clubs." These press clubs are institutionalized associations of journalists, often based in facilities provided by government organizations, companies, and other institutions, where journalists from member news organizations gather and exchange information. They also note that journalists at major news organizations commonly rotate between different areas of coverage. For communication professionals, understanding the media therefore involves more than identifying the relevant publication or journalist; it also requires an understanding of the relationships and routines through which information moves.

Tsutomu Igaki, Managing Executive Officer responsible for sustainability, brand, stakeholder engagement, and communications at OMRON Corporation, who has worked with the Japanese media landscape over many years, makes a similar point from the corporate side. Relationships with media executives, business desks, and journalists remain an important part of strategic communication. He describes the multi-layered relationships he has built with key media organizations as a foundation for effective communication in Japan. For instance, it is important to give journalists context that a formal announcement alone may not provide, including information about the company's background, management's intentions, and the broader social context. Sustained dialogue with trusted media can improve the accuracy and depth of reporting. At the same time, companies must handle information that has not been publicly disclosed with great care, since perceived unfairness about who receives that information can undermine trust in the company.

Media mix in Japan

Generally, social media should be viewed as part of a broader communication architecture that includes traditional media, digital platforms, owned media, and opportunities for direct dialogue. The mix of channels reflects each audience's interests and information behavior.

- LINE, a widely used messaging and digital platform, functions as a powerful everyday touchpoint with consumers.
- X plays an important role in news circulation, opinion formation, and rapid reactions duringcrises.
- YouTube is used as a channel for deepening understanding and building empathy.
- LinkedIn, by contrast, does not yet have the same level of influence as in Europe or the United States.
- Business newspapers and specialist publications are still relevant for business audiences, while investors and analysts rely on channels such as integrated reports, IR websites, and earnings briefings.
- Corporate and recruitment websites, internal communication, and social media are important for employees and potential recruits, alongside industry media, trade shows, and webinars for customers and business partners.

Stakeholder expectations

Japanese stakeholders, according to Igaki, expect companies to demonstrate not only the quality of their products and services, but also their responsibility as members of society. Employees value alignment with the company's management direction and corporate philosophy, as well as meaningful work and an inclusive workplace. Customers and consumers look for safety, reliability, quality, and sincere responses, while also paying close attention to how companies contribute to solving social issues. For investors, government bodies, and local communities, transparent disclosure and accountability for long-term value creation are increasingly essential, while silence or vague messaging can create uncertainty and weaken trust. An appropriate apology, when warranted, is an important element of responsible communication.

Stakeholders pay close attention not only to the facts a company presents, but also to how it acknowledges the issue and demonstrates accountability toward those affected. Consistency between words and actions is examined closely; communication must therefore be specific, credible, and firmly grounded in actual behavior. Trust, in Japan, is cultivated through consistent dialogue, accurate information sharing, and respect for the other party. Social harmony, relationships, humility, and accountability carry particular weight.

One of the most pressing challenges, however, is that corporate communication has not yet fully kept pace with the expanding role society expects companies to play. The issues companies must address – sustainability, human capital, DEI, AI, data utilization, and geopolitical risk – are becoming more complex, while stakeholders expect even faster and greater transparency. In an environment where information spreads instantly through social media and video platforms, the precision, timing, and context of communication matter more than ever.

Key do's and don'ts for corporate communication

Do's

- Understand your stakeholders and your own organization.
- Align voices.
- Make a formal apology in front of the media when appropriate.
- Combine official announcements with appropriate background briefings.
- Build relationships of trust with stakeholders over time.

Don'ts

- Don't evade responsibility in times of crisis. Apologize when warranted.
- Don't lie – the truth will come out eventually.
- Don't assume the world stays still.
- Don't make overly assertive claims or use exaggerated language.
- Don't apply global messages directly to the Japanese market without adaptation.
- Don't respond with silence or ambiguity.

Source: Yusuke Ibuki, Tsutomu Igaki, and Koichi Yamamura

A CHANGING COMMUNICATION LANDSCAPE

According to Igaki, corporate communication in Japan has entered a period of profound transformation and he points to the increasing complexity created by geopolitical tensions and diverging international frameworks. OMRON, for example, is headquartered in Kyoto, Japan's former imperial capital, but operates in around 130 countries and regions. Its communication therefore has to take account of frameworks from Japan, the United States, China, the European Union, and the United Nations, with implications for areas ranging from accounting and capital markets to supply chains, information security, environmental issues, human rights, and occupational safety. For communication, this means that "the era of communicating globally with a simple 'one voice' is over," as he puts it. Communications need to uphold a consistent corporate philosophy and clear judgment criteria while remaining sensitive to regional realities.

At the same time, Yamamura and Ibuki point to a related challenge within Japanese organizations: a shortage of communication professionals with sufficient knowledge of overseas cultures and languages, particularly languages other than English. This can be difficult for small and medium-sized companies (SMEs) seeking to build communication capabilities in overseas markets.

The changing expectations for corporate communication

However, internationalization is only one of several changes taking place within Japanese companies. Government-led reforms affecting capital markets and listed companies have encouraged companies to engage more with investors and placed greater emphasis on corporate governance and transparency. The expansion of ESG investment, particularly following Japan's Government Pension Investment Fund becoming a signatory to the Principles for Responsible Investment in 2015, has further broadened the range of stakeholders engaging with companies.

For Igaki, this has changed what communication is expected to do: Corporate communication in Japan is evolving from a function centered on media relations into an integrated management function that articulates corporate purpose, contribution to society, and management transparency. As companies are expected to explain their broader responsibilities, communications are increasingly about building long-term trust through sincerity, accuracy, and sustained stakeholder engagement, rather than pursuing short-term visibility. Intangible assets, including digital transformation, sustainability, human capital, brand, and intellectual property, are now directly linked to management priorities. Communication teams are expected not only to disseminate information but also to connect management with society. As a result, they are becoming increasingly involved in issues traditionally handled elsewhere in the organization.

The next phase of Japanese corporate communication

AI and social networking platforms are likely to add another layer to an already changing communication landscape. Igaki expects the use of AI and data to make communication more efficient and personalized, but argues that human judgment, ethical awareness, and trustworthiness will become even more important. Yamamura and Ibuki place these developments alongside two issues that are particularly relevant to Japan: the growing importance of global PR and the consequences of a declining and aging population. The latter is not simply a demographic statistic for communication. It affects the organizations that companies communicate with, the workforce they rely on, and the social environment in which they operate. In essence, Japanese companies are likely to find it increasingly difficult to rely solely on the domestic market.

Taken together, these developments point to a communication environment in which companies need to navigate greater complexity while maintaining continuity and trust. In many Japanese business contexts, where long-term relationships and trust continue to be emphasized, the challenge will not only be to respond quickly to change, but also to build consensus carefully and create a shared sense of understanding among stakeholders.

CONTRIBUTORS



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MORE INFORMATION

Based on interviews conducted and edited by Managing Editor Dr. Michelle Wloka. For more information on "generalist PR," see Kunieda, T., Yamamura, K., & Miyabe, J. (Eds.). (2019). Public Relations in Japan – Evolution of communication management in a culture of lifetime employment, Routledge.

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