

Japan Must Learn the True Meaning of “Hospitality”

With the government looking to more than double the number of inbound visitors to Japan by the year 2020, **Tadayuki Hara** sees a critical need for universities to boost their hospitality-related education.

In Japan, the words “tourism” and “hospitality” are often used interchangeably, as though they were identical concepts. They are not, although they do in part overlap. Tourism encompasses the larger portion of “activities of persons traveling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business, and other purposes” (United Nations World Tourism Organization), and thus is concerned with macro-level activities. Hospitality is the industrial sector in which companies provide consumers with goods and services in exchange for payment through direct interaction, and thus is concerned with micro-level activities. Tourism and hospitality overlap where the goods and services of the hospitality industry are offered to consumers of tourism commodities, such as hotel accommodation and restaurant food. The terms do not wholly overlap because a restaurant, for example, may cater to local residents as well as tourists. In other words, hospitality as an industrial sector requires commercial transactions of goods and services while tourism does not. The core of hospitality management is the science by which a company formulates a sustainable model in which consumers are satisfied with their experience and come back for more.

The word “hospitality” is often used as a translation for the Japanese word “omotenashi,” which generally means a host entertaining his or her guests at home without compensation. However, the English word “hospitali-

ty” has commercial aspects. While people rightly consider omotenashi to be an important element of tourism, they also need to recognize the commercial aspects of hospitality as an industry. The provider of services has to optimize allocation of internal resources to provide services satisfactory to the buyer at a sustainable price level. It is common that middle and upper management personnel are in short supply as a nation starts to develop tourism as an industry. The reasonable success of Japan so far is attributable to the personal traits of those working in the service industry, namely the front employees, but as the government has set a goal of receiving 20 million inbound visitors by 2020, it is critical for Japan to develop sufficient numbers of managers with systematic managerial knowledge and skills in the fields of hospitality and tourism.

Role of Higher Education

Tourism as an academic subject has few barriers of entry from other academic disciplines with little or no commercial aspects, such as sociology, anthropology, linguistics, history, and geography, and indeed all of those have some connection with aspects of tourism. In the United States, universities used to hire retired executives from tourism-related sectors as storytellers whose classes were more subjective explanations of “my life in the industry.” It was about thirty years ago that “management” came to be the leading common denominator of the curricula of top hospitality schools,

such as the Cornell School of Hotel Administration. The schools realized that attractive placement of graduating students existed at micro-level hospitality companies. Today, over 90% of placements are at micro-level hospitality companies, such as hotels, restaurant companies, theme parks and event management companies. It would be very challenging for students to find jobs if they studied qualitative subjects only, and that is the main reason why hospitality management education has been emphasized at universities in the United States. In Japan, however, there are thirty-seven universities with tourism and hospitality programs, and the majority of them appear to emphasize predominantly qualitative tourism education.

Let’s review the business model of hospitality and tourism education. For our purposes, and I believe this would be the case for any hospitality and tourism management school in the United States, our customers are not students but the industry (hospitality and tourism). Students are our products. As long as an institute of higher education receives any form of government funding (taxpayers’ money), we have an obligation to society to produce consistently high-quality products (graduating students) for our customers (the industry). Once we notice our products are not fully appreciated by our customers, we have to review our process of production (our curriculum) to check whether we are teaching what the industry requires and seek to add value to our products (graduating students). This is a normal process in the private sector. If academics sit in their ivory tower and don’t listen to the needs of the industry, their students will not be well placed in the hospitality and tourism industry. In the United States, that would lead to either revision of the curriculum or even closure of the department.

If the number of Nobel Prizes recently awarded to Japanese scientists is anything to go by, there is no problem with Japan’s higher education standards generally. By the same token, the dearth of Japanese scholars and researchers at major international tourism conferences would indicate that Japanese tourism programs lack a

global perspective. Instead of unilaterally teaching tourism culture, tourism history, tourism events, Japanese tea ceremony and so on—some of which topics would be better pursued as extracurricular activities—the schools should ensure that their students master basic management knowledge and skills. These skills would include accounting, financial statement analysis, marketing, services management, human resources management, strategic management, food and beverage management and organizational behavior.

Why Micro-level Hospitality Management Knowledge Is Essential for Macro-level Tourism Development

Acknowledging that discussions so far have been dry and conceptual, let us be more specific. What do you think of when you hear the place name “Las Vegas”? Your answer is likely to include things like gambling, casinos, shows and so on. Now how about “Paris”? Cafés, art, fine food... Certain destinations have a strong brand image, strong enough for us all to imagine the same sort of things simply by hearing the name. It is difficult to sell a place to consumers if it does not have a strong brand image. What do you think of when you hear the place name “Japan”? Japan probably generates a variety of contrasting images, so that in fact we think of sub-brands. We may think of Sony, Toyota, Canon; Kyoto, Hiroshima, the historical heritage sites, Mt. Fuji, Akihabara (the pop culture heartland of Tokyo), Fukuoka (Japan’s gateway for many Korean tourists), Niseko ski resorts (so popular with Australians); Hello Kitty, Naruto and other cartoon characters...

Our image of Japan may well vary significantly depending on our nationality, age, gender, educational level, hobbies and so on. People have their preferences, and the one-size-fits-all approach to tourism is now highly outdated.

In destination marketing, marketers carefully collect data from potential customers or those who have visited regarding what they like or liked, what they did not like, what they ex-

pected and whether those expectations were met, then conduct statistical analyses so that they can match the preferences of certain personal profiles with the inventories of tourism commodities that they have. Though it is macro-level government officers who are in charge of regional promotion to attract tourists, the required skills and knowledge are the same as those for managers of private enterprises.

Some of the tourism commodities available in Japan have spectacular potential to be unique for certain segments of overseas tourists. Beppu in Oita Prefecture, for instance, has the second highest amount of hot spring water in the world, after Yellowstone National Park in the United States. Since Yellowstone is not a populated city, Beppu is the No.1 city in the world in terms of the amount of water coming out of its hot springs. The only problem is that even Japanese people do not know much about it, and neither do potential tourists around the world. Without knowledge of scientific destination marketing, local planners at Beppu may come up with an idea of securing a budget for printing color brochures in multiple foreign languages and put them at airports or promotion offices, when instead they would be better served focusing on those segments already enjoying spa resorts in their home nations or who enjoy Japanese foods, or who spend money on maintaining their wellness, and so on. First, create a web page in multiple languages explaining how potential visitors can reach Beppu from Narita, Kansai, Fukuoka or Oita Airports; provide information about life in Beppu, such as where you can purchase croissants, yogurt, American breakfasts; detail the history of Beppu, and so on.

Next, the marketer would have to consider how to outreach the selected segments. Research on what they read, what they purchase, or what they do in



An innkeeper sprinkles water outside her premises in a traditional gesture intended to “cleanse” entering guests.

their leisure time would provide some hints on how to outreach specific groups of consumers. Once they come, in exchange for free unique gifts of the region perhaps, it would be useful to then ask their cooperation with surveys, analysis of which would enable the city to improve their tourism commodities offerings. It is nothing but science for business.

Japan has to develop human resources for the hospitality and tourism industry with solid skills and knowledge of the latest management techniques of social science urgently, because more and more nations are starting to compete for tourists at these sophisticated scientific levels. Japanese people are by default not good at selling their products aggressively, and often think, “If we have something attractive and superior, they will come and find us.” While such a humble attitude may be one of the attractions of Japan, the government’s objective of receiving 20 million inbound visitors by the year 2020 cannot be achieved without the development by universities of hundreds of thousands of managerial candidates for the tourism and hospitality sectors. The universities appear to be in need of fine-tuning their curricula. □

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