

FRESH AND CLEAN: CREATING A NEW TOILET CULTURE

BIFUE USHIJIMA

First launched in Japan in 1980 and marketed in the U.S., Europe, Asia and Oceania since the late 1980s, the TOTO Washlet® electronic bidet continues to gain loyal customers who want to stay fresh and clean after one of the body's most basic functions.



1

RINSING off after using the toilet is now a custom so prevalent that many Japanese people feel they cannot live without it. In 2015, thirty-five years after the device launched, cumulative global shipments of TOTO's Washlet reached forty million units, thanks to the developer's many ingenious adjustments.

TOTO LTD. (then called THE TOYO TOKI CO., LTD.) actually imported and sold an American product called the "Wash Air Seat" over a decade before the Washlet was released in 1980. The Wash Air Seat was a device developed for individuals who had difficulty wiping themselves using toilet paper due to hand injuries or excretion-related diseases. Medical professionals such as urologists were their main sales target.

Foreseeing an expansion in market demand, TOTO started developing a different, more user-friendly product in 1978, with the ambition of creating a "new toilet culture."

During product development, the developers uncompromisingly pursued comfort and usability. They learned from the feedback of many Wash Air Seat users, who noted issues such as inconsistent water temperature and discomfort due to unstable shower direction. Since there was no actual data about sitting on toilet seats, they set up a laboratory within the company and studied the positioning of the buttocks to gather data. With the help of more than three hundred company employees they also searched for the best water temperature for washing, testing different temperatures at 0.1°C intervals.

This research revealed that a seat temperature of 36 degrees Celsius, water temperature of 38 degrees, and a shower angle of 43 degrees created the optimal experience. These figures remain nearly unchanged nearly forty years after the initial product release.

To stabilize the temperature of water and hot air, which was the most difficult problem, they



2



4



3

- 1 TOTO's first washlet, which went on sale in 1980
- 2 Yoshinori Kuwahara, TOTO LTD. PR Department
- 3 The Air In Wonder Wave washlet utilizes air-filled drops of water to leave you feeling fresh and clean
- 4 The new luxury NEOREST Series perfectly combines design and functionality

introduced integrated circuit (IC) microcomputer controls. According to Yoshinori Kuwahara of the company's public relations department, there is a famous anecdote about introducing ICs. "Initially we consulted with consumer electronics manufacturers about it, and they stubbornly insisted that ICs were too delicate to use in places they might get wet. However, a member of the development team had an epiphany when he was walking outside. Coming across a traffic light, he realized it was an electronic device that worked despite getting wet in the rain. So we consulted with a traffic light manufacturer instead, and were thus able to bring the idea of a microcomputer-controlled toilet to reality."

After the device debuted in 1980, the number of Washlets sold gradually increased. With sales in overseas markets still growing steadily, TOTO plans to start operating their fifth Washlet production plant in Thailand in 2020, which will be their third

overseas plant after one each in Malaysia and China. They plan to push their overseas expansion forward.

For models destined for use overseas, the design and look of the Washlet is given even more weight than in Japan. "Unlike Japan, where toilets are put in separate rooms, in Western and other Asian countries it is common for the sink, bath and toilet to be located in the same room," Kuwahara explains. "In this type of bathroom the toilet can be seen from all sides, so it is important for it to blend in and not disturb the aesthetics of the room."

The key to product promotion is the rising number of international visitors to Japan. Though many of them are deeply impressed with the cleanliness of public toilets in Japan, once they experience the comfort of a Washlet, they want to use one daily. "We want to gain more TOTO fans all over the world, with the intent to make Japan an international showcase," Kuwahara says about the company's vision. **7**