

Big in Japan

Purported to be Japan's first creative agency specialising in brand vision and identity, Bravis now has three subsidiaries in Asia and four sales offices.

Dominique Huret spent a day in Shibuya with its chief executive

Bravis has come a long way since it was founded more than two decades ago in central Tokyo, Japan. Its chief executive Fumi Sasada was born in Japan in the early 1950s but his life changed dramatically at 15 when, without being able to speak a word of English, he was sent to high school in California, USA, which then meant a two-week sea voyage.

"At first I was surrounded by Mexican schoolboys and learned basic Spanish, but soon I adjusted thanks to work and the Japanese local communities," he said during a *Plastics in Packaging* visit. "After college at LA State University, I entered the Art Center College of Design, the famous design school in Pasadena, California. My heart was swinging between photography and design."

The first option involved buying expensive equipment, whereas design simply required a pencil and a ruler. This choice was the beginning of Sasada's career.

"At 26, I was hired by a famous American design company, which operated from a creative office boat on Pier 5 in San Francisco. All newcomers were seasick the first weeks," he said.

Fifteen years after he left Japan, Sasada relocated back there in 1983, now with a family of his own. Bolstered by his professional and multicultural experiences, he started his own company in 1996 to focus on brand and visual identity. The formative years took place during what he calls "rough economic times".



"We started with five people in a pretty virgin niche, as nearly no packaging agencies were available," he explained. "Kirin Beer, Meiji, and Nestlé Japan all came to us and 20 years on are still loyal to us today."

The company offers a wide range of services from brand strategy, identity, naming and character design to retail and interactive design, and of course packaging design. And true to the spirit of its founding father, the company's



Above: Shanghai Uni-President Company has a vibrant and modern look for its beverages.

Left: Major brands remain loyal to Fumi Sasada's design company.

Right: Bravis' Japanese teams link up with the company's other subsidiaries to discuss each design project

working philosophy is centered on creativity and teamwork.

In the Tokyo office, there are three different teams operating from three unique open spaces dedicated to various customers. However, on receipt of a project, the three Japanese teams, and those from the other Asian subsidiaries, meet up – often by video-link – to generate ideas and concepts. Twenty concepts are then selected and presented to the client, with five



Above left: Keeping packaging fresh is a prerequisite of brand success. Above centre: Shuhei Iwahama works on the company's major on-going design project with Meiji's Bulgaria yoghurt. Above right: Designers Masaaki Inuma (left) and Yoshiro None flank chief executive Fumi Sasada



Above: Bravis' Japanese teams link up with the company's other subsidiaries to discuss each design project. Right: Kinako Kitamura, Yoshito Watanabe and Yurie Takenouchi showcase the importance to Meiji of retaining customer loyalty and attracting younger consumers



or six chosen for development. Consumer research follows.

"Of course it is expensive to dedicate all our creative designer time to every new project, but it is, I believe, the recipe of our success," he added. "The creativity of 80 minds is just amazing and makes the dynamic of the process just richer."

Japanese dairy producer Meiji's Bulgaria yoghurt is one such project that is ongoing for Bravis. Every other year the entire packaging needs to be changed but – and this is crucial – the changes have to be incremental so that the customer hardly notices them. The rationale behind this is two-fold: retaining customer loyalty and attracting younger consumers. The

average lifespan of a trademark is 30 years and Meiji has already celebrated 43 years of existence.

"With such frequent changes to the packaging look, only plastics give full freedom for creativity," he said. "This is, in addition to quality and hygiene, a prerequisite for picky Japanese consumers."

The 2019 success story for Bravis is, without a doubt, Nestlé Japan's KitKat. The hugely popular confectionery has become something of an icon in Japan. 'Kitto Katto' in Japanese can be translated as 'absolutely' (kitto) 'to win' (katsu), which makes the Japanese wordplay

'you're bound to win' or 'you will never fail'.

For the last two decades, Japanese adults have been treating their children and teenagers with the snack as a good luck charm and to help bring success in exams. Nestlé identified this opportunity to release special KitKats with positive messages such as 'Do your best' and 'Believe in yourself'. Hundreds of special editions that are tailored exclusively for a Japanese audience help to maintain the brand's cult-like status.

"It goes without saying that every packaging project with this product is big," he continued. "And so was the change from plastics to paper for the secondary bag, which was implemented this past summer."

Other lower-profile yet still interesting projects include Kirin's PET revamp for its amino supli vitamin drinks. The 2019 version looks more 'clinical' and modern.

Shanghai Uni-President Company's Uminogen sells a lemon-flavoured beverage aimed at proper hydration and salt recovery. Based on the idea that delicious water and salt contained in this product are gifts from the sea, the blue-green bottle evokes this idea, with wave-like splashes to create a symbolic logo mark.

Several prestigious Pentawards (International Packaging Design Awards) have honoured the company in the last ten years across various types of packaging. And the most recent project of the energetic chief executive is the first 'Olympac' Student Package Design competition, where the intention is to give talented students selected from around the world the chance to develop high-quality designs in a very short time.

It provides creativity exercises, fun, a sense of achievement and, of course, the chance to be spotted by the Bravis chief executive, just as he was discovered years earlier.

"Myself, I am not an artist, but a designer," he concluded. "I answer to the needs of my clients. I'm like a boxer, helping them to have product standing out in the marketplace. With competitors all around, the loser is quickly moved out of the market."

"Good packaging design needs to stand out and convey a strong message to potential buyers, and it is not enough for a package to look beautiful, it has to sell the product too. This is key: an estimated 60 per cent of shoppers are impulse buyers that decide to purchase a particular product once they are inside the store. Information is key to success."

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