

Japanese women 'can have it all'

Successful CEO Kumi Sato urges salaried women to 'stay in game'

By ALEX MARTIN

Staff writer

As a female CEO in a nation known for its male-dominated corporate ranks, Kumi Sato says it is her mission to spread the message that despite the challenges posed by social and gender expectations, Japanese women could "have it all" if they wanted.

And she is not just talking the talk. As a testament to Sato's decades of leadership in heading Cosmo Public Relations Corp., a communications and marketing consultancy in Tokyo, she became in November the first Japanese to be named "Agency Head of the Year" in the Asia-Pacific region by the trade magazine PR Week.

Sato, who has been president of Cosmo for the past 24 years, said she believes the award recognizes how, despite the prolonged economic stagnation in Japan, her company has managed to adapt to the times and remain profitable.

"Despite the fact that the Japanese economy has been rapidly declining for more than two decades, we've been fortunate to continue to be above the line, in other words, we seem to do much better than economic indicators," Sato said.

"And I've tried to make it a point when I go around the world that the rest of Asia and the world don't forget that Japan exists," Sato, a wife and a mother of three, said.

Sato, 51, was only 27 years old when she bought Cosmo, a PR company her parents founded in 1960.

Before taking over her parents' company, however, she had founded and headed Cosmo International, a consultancy based in the United States that specialized in helping small and midsize Japanese companies enter the American market, after working as a consultant at McKinsey and Co. in New York.

Sato said she made a point of buying the company rather than inheriting it, because she had "seen too many bad cases where the parent is staying at the company as a chairman, or breathing down the neck of the president."

But introducing American-style business practices to a Japanese company proved to be much more difficult than she expected.

"The original plan was to turn the company around, sell it, and go back to the U.S. or somewhere else," she said. "But I'm still here . . . I didn't realize things take so long down here."

Over the years, Sato said she has managed to turn the company into a successful consulting firm and diversify its overwhelmingly Japanese roster of clients into 70 percent multinational companies.

But perhaps the biggest change she made occurred a decade ago, when she began concentrating on offering services in health care.

Whether it's information about a new medical treatment or a chance to educate stakeholders, there is a "tremendous opportunity" and demand for communications in health care, especially in light of the aging population, she said.

About 60 percent of Cosmo's clients are in health care, including blue chip companies like Pfizer Inc. and GlaxoSmithKline.

"We currently work with many American and European device and pharmaceutical companies, and that seems to keep us busy even with the flux of the Japanese economy," Sato said, adding that health care remains one of the very few recession-proof industries.

As Cosmo marked its 50th anniversary last year, Sato had further plans in mind to bolster her company's future. One is the creation of what she called a "thought-leadership collective," essentially a network of health care experts in East Asia.

Cosmo's strategy will be to identify experts in various fields throughout Asia and have them provide business solutions.

"It's like having a robust network of thought leaders in the region," she said.

Sato, who was born and raised in Japan, attended Nishimachi International School in Minato Ward, Tokyo, and the American School in Japan before graduating from Wellesley College in Massachusetts with a B.A. in East Asian Studies.

Sato said it was unusual at the time for a Japanese family to enroll children in an international school, but she had a "set of parents who believed that English was going to be very important for us growing up."

"I was very fortunate to be able to learn a language when I was a child, to go beyond Japan, to not have to feel intimidated by the rest of the world.

"I think that helped me a lot in terms of doing business with global companies, but also in giving speeches outside of Japan and attending conferences and speaking on behalf of Japan — these are skills that stem from the confidence that was ingrained in me since I was a pretty young kid."

Based on her experience as a pioneer in corporate Japan, Sato has been an advocate for workplace equality. In 1999, she launched one of the first websites in Japan dedicated to the empowerment of women, called womenjapan.com.

"I don't understand why, when there is an aging population and only a small number of immigrants coming in, corporations and government don't do more to encourage women to enter the workforce," Sato said. While more day care facilities and other infrastructure are necessary to ease the burden on working women, she also said it's important to change their mindset and spread the positive message that "you can do it."

"The reality is that if you drop out of any work for more than a year, it's very difficult to get back into the workforce," she said.

"Everybody's dispensable, including myself. That's why when I had my children, I made sure I came back to work as soon as possible," she said.

And despite the difficulty of balancing child-rearing with work, Sato stressed the benefits of "staying in the game."

"I just want to tell women here that there is a price to pay, of course, but staying in the game is actually in the long run incredibly rewarding, and also really good for the family," Sato said.

"I have three kids, the youngest is in college, one is in grad school and the other is working — and I'm only 51 and I'm an empty-nester, and I am so happy that I have a career. Otherwise, what am I going to do?" she laughed.

Sato is married to Donald P. Kanak, chairman of Prudential Corp. Asia, and spends a portion of her time in Hong Kong, where he resides.

Besides running her company, Sato is an active participant in several committees and boards, including as governor of the American Chamber of Commerce in Japan and cochairman of the New-York based Asia Society Global Council. She is also a member of the Japan Association of Corporate Executives (Keizai Doyukai) and the nonprofit organization Genron.

In 2007, she published a book titled "Aisareru Kaisha no Joken" ("How to Become a Popular Company"), which explores and compares views on corporate social responsibility among Japanese and American companies.

Now she is working on a textbook on business communication due to be published this year.

Sato said that "extracurricular" activities like these give her more flexibility and impact her work in a positive way.

"It makes me a little bit more independent with my activities," she said.



Boardroom pioneer: Kumi Sato, president and CEO of Cosmo Public Relations Corp., is interviewed at her office in Minato Ward, Tokyo, on Dec. 9. YOSHIKI MIURA PHOTO