

Women get rare chance for promotion

Strong sales of beauty products make Panasonic manager a star

By YURI KAGEYAMA
The Associated Press

It shouldn't be surprising that Panasonic's star manager for developing appliances for women is a woman herself — except that this is Japan, a nation notorious for holding back females in the workplace.

The beauty products Shiori Yamada has developed and runs marketing campaigns for have turned out to be hits. And that was the easiest way to silence all the male skeptics at Panasonic Corp.



Rising star: Shiori Yamada, manager of Panasonic Corp.'s beauty production development team, talks about one of her popular products, the ball-shaped Nano Care humidifier/skin moisturizer, in Tokyo last month. AP PHOTO

One of Yamada's popular products, the ball-shaped Nano Care humidifier billed as a skin moisturizer, sold 350,000 in a year. She came up with an improved version that works while you sleep, a feature designed to appeal to busy working women.

The formula has worked, and sales are going well. Panasonic is emerging as a pioneer in such beauty care gadgetry, with barely a rival in sight.

"All you have to do is put it beside your pillow and turn on the switch. You don't need to do a thing," Yamada, a demure woman with a steadfast gaze, said at the company's Tokyo office. "Everyone wants to be beautiful, but it's hard to find the time."

Yamada, 36, is a rare exception in corporate Japan.

Her success at Panasonic comes despite the difficulties women still face in this male-dominated culture, where women typically build opportunities by capitalizing on their gender — not by seeking a level playing field free of stereotypes.

Japan ranked 101st in the "gender gap index" study by the World Economic Forum, an international nonprofit group that measured the economic opportunities and political empowerment of women by nation in 2009. Iceland ranked No. 1 while the U.S. was No. 31.

Japanese women make up just 9 percent of senior officials and managers — a tiny share compared with 43 percent in the U.S., 17 percent in China and 38 percent in France, according to data from the International Labor Office compiled by Catalyst Inc., a New York-based nonprofit that pushes for business opportunities for women.

Despite its reputation as one of Japan's more egalitarian major companies, Panasonic had just 2,000 women among its 38,000 managers — about 5 percent — although the number of female managers at the company tripled over the last four years.

For many female managers, the beauty care division is the place to start. Panasonic ads for Nano Care are plastered on commuter trains, perfect places to catch the eye of working women. The posters, some of them electronic, woo women-on-the-go buyers with phrases like: "I don't have time these days to look good," and "From busy to beautiful."

Morra Aarons-Mele, the founder of consulting company Women Online and an expert on women's professional development, thinks it's not enough for a company to have smart women who know how to market to women, and says it's more critical whether such women get to rise to leadership positions.

"If the Panasonic women's products are simply a public relations stunt or a fun marketing idea that won't go much further, then I do think they are unfairly typecasting women product designers," she said.

"If these new programs help some women designers get noticed and promoted to a place where they can take the lead in designing many products, not just hair dryers, then I think it's great."

Aarons-Mele points to the "women leadership forum" — or WOLF — program at U.S. electronics retail chain Best Buy, which not only recognizes that women buy most home appliances but also promotes women professionally and encourages networking and learning.

At Panasonic, the battle is just starting.

Yamada's booming sales record has helped another woman win promotion to Panasonic's marketing post for electric shavers.

Although that product targets men, Panasonic figured that a quick way to get a man to buy something may be to convince his girlfriend or partner.

And so the woman manager has cast a male heartthrob singer in the new shaver ads, designed to win over women.

Panasonic's beauty-care unit has also scored success with hot-pink hair dryers that promise healthy hair and miniature hot-curlers for eyelashes.

Whatever the wares, Yamada is confident her team of women has mastered the way to a woman's heart — something she says her male counterparts and bosses can't hope to match.

Kazuyo Katsuma, an economic analyst and author of hit books about empowering women, says Japan has been isolated from global changes in sexual equality for so long that it is simply not used to dealing with diversity, including foreigners and the disabled, not just women.

Although many companies mean well and want to provide opportunities for women, the system in place isn't set up to allow that, and most women who have been working full time quit after giving birth to their first child, she said.

"Change is going to take a generation," she said, adding that the economic slowdown, which has cut down on lucrative job opportunities, has an increasing number of women in their 20s and 30s looking to just become housewives.

"But if you look at the economic indicators for women in Japan, we are not going backward compared with 10 years ago. It's just that progress has been slow compared with the rapid progress elsewhere."

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