

Body Shop Japan starts recycling effort

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While some industries are trying to cash in on environment-friendly products, cosmetics companies did not think of jumping on the bandwagon — that is except for Body Shop Japan.

After painstaking negotiations with the Health and Welfare Ministry, the Japanese franchise of the British cosmetics company won approval last month to reuse containers for some of its products.

Although the concept is common in other countries, Japan's pharmaceutical laws have kept cosmetic firms from introducing the recycling service here.

"Whether we will succeed here is an acid test for the Japanese, who are often accused for poor awareness of



Mitsu Kimata

environmental issues and human rights," said Mitsu Kimata, 50, president of Aeon Forest Co., which operates Body Shop Japan.

The ministry said containers can be reused as long as bottles of specified shampoo and conditioners are refilled with the same products, and are cleaned and dried, and the labels are legible.

"In Britain, there is a woman who has used the same bottles over and over for 15 years," Kimata said. "I wondered why we couldn't do it in Japan, which relies heavily on other countries' resources."

Body Shop was founded in Britain in 1976 and now operates 900 shops in 23 countries. Its business principles include using natural ingredients, recycling, philanthropy, opposition to animal testing and a ban on advertising.

When Kimata learned through Takuya Okada, chairman of Jusco Co., that Body Shop was looking for someone to manage its business in Japan, she thought it would be a challenging position. She quit her job of 30 years in the Labor Ministry and became president of Aeon Forest in June 1990.

Since the company's ideas were too innovative to be accepted by Japan's business community, domestic firms expected this "black sheep" of the cosmetics industry to fail, Kimata said.

The first shop, which opened its doors in October 1990 in Tokyo's Omotesando area, rang up ¥350 million in sales in the first year. Since then, the shop has remained among the top cash earners of the 40 outlets outside Britain.

The latest shop opened in Osaka last week as the first

outlet in the Kansai area and the 13th in Japan.

One of Body Shop's concepts is to use its shops to educate staff and consumers on issues ranging from the environment to AIDS.

In an effort to raise social awareness on human rights, Kimata carried out a three-week campaign in 1991 at the Omotesando shop with the cooperation of the Amnesty International Japanese Section.

Anita Roddick, founder and president of the firm, believes the cosmetics industry is a "nasty business" controlled by "men who manipulate women with unreasonably expensive products contained in colorful packages."

About 80 percent of her 230 shops in Britain are run by women, along with 11 of the 13 in Japan.

"Japan is a treasure house of talented women, but many businesses don't know how to facilitate their talent," Kimata said.

A 1960 graduate of the University of Tokyo, Kimata worked in the Labor Ministry's section on vocational training for people from developing countries. She was sent to the United Nations as a Japanese representative in charge of social, human rights and racial problems.

"I didn't want to be looked down on because I am a woman. So, I worked really hard and I made it," she said.

Kimata wants younger women to move up to her position, but her current focus is to increase the number of Body Shop outlets in Japan by as many as 50 in five years.