

## “Today, the Day of the Ox, the Day of the Eels”: Marketing Lessons of Gennai Hiraga, a Renaissance Man of the Eighteenth Century Japan

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Doyō no ushi no hi, or the Day of the Ox during the doyō season of the Chinese lunar calendar, connotes a special dietary custom for Japanese consumers; it is a day to eat eels. Doyō is duration of eighteen days before the beginning of autumn, which is considered the hottest period of summer. They say that eating eels, the source of energy-producing nutrition, on this particular day prevents them from succumbing to the summer heat. Whether Japanese consumers truly believe such quasi-superstitious dietary heuristic is questionable. However, eating eels on this day is the norm to many. Furthermore, that the sales of eels on this day are reported manifold suggests the nontrivial commercial power of this folk belief and the effectiveness of an advertising copy “Honjitsu (Today), doyō no ushi no hi” that triggers Japanese consumers to repeat this time-honored dietary ritual: Eat eels.

Gennai Hiraga, a masterless samurai, is believed, although not documented, to have created this influential copy in the second half of the 18th century. Gennai is considered the first known creative advertising copywriter in Japan; he wrote witty and humorous advertising copy for handbills and attracted the townspeople of Edo, or today’s Tokyo. A versatile Renaissance man, he was also a pharmacologist, phytologist, zoologist, inventor, metallurgist, playwright, and painter, among others, but unfortunately a master of none. As a dignified former samurai, one field in which he did not seek fame was marketing. Ironically, in retrospect he made innovative contributions to this less respected field, particularly advertising. The current paper discusses an advertising copy and marketing strategies of Gennai Hiraga. The primary objective of the study is to analyze advertising decisions, such as the target audience and message strategies, for the toothpowder brand Sōsekikō.

Although Western-made paradigmatic marketing concepts did not enter Japan until the Westernization of social institutions took place during the early Meiji Era (1868-1913), quite sophisticated marketing activities had existed during the Edo Period (1603-1868) of Japan. Before the 18th century, merchants relied on signboards and shop curtains bearing the name of the store as a means of promotion. Then hikifuda, or handbills, emerged in the

late 17th century and became popular in the early 18th century in Edo as an indispensable means of trade among small retail businesses. Hikifuda was a one-page printed copy without any visuals. In its early days, merchants printed on hikifuda a list of their merchandising items and their store name, and distributed these handbills to their patrons around the time of two most important obligatory gift-giving customs, ochūgen (mid-year gifts) and oseibo (year-end gifts). Later, handbills became a means of announcing the opening of new shops and the introduction of new products.

Although Gennai was not the first to write hikifuda copy, he was the first gesakusha, or light fiction writer, who wrote creative copy to attract the audience. Gennai’s first documented hikifuda copy is dated from 1769. It was a handbill for the toothpowder brand Sōsekikō. Gennai wrote the witty copy for a failing merchant, taught him how to manufacture toothpowder, advised him to package the powder in boxes rather than bags and to sell the refill at a reduced price. Since hikifuda had no visuals, the primary target audience of the advertisement consisted of the modestly educated middle-class male townspeople in Edo. As the copy was written in a colloquial Edo-dialect style, it should have been easily verbally transmitted from the primary audience group to their fellow Edoites. The copy shows that these consumers were by no means naïve, and accordingly, Gennai did not disguise commercial motives and marketing tactics of merchants in the copy, which increased credibility of the claims.

The subhead copy of the hikifuda shows the two most important benefits of the Sōsekikō toothpowder: It whitens teeth and removes odors from mouth. This implies consumers even in the commoner class valued (and could afford to worry about) oral hygiene and cosmetic beauty of their teeth. Gennai’s advertising copy reveals that the brand Sōsekikō was not an innovative product; there were competing brands of toothpowder sold in bags. The body copy describes that ingredients of powders were more or less the same across competing offerings, and each brand differentiated itself by labeling and packaging designs. Since the copy states that the marketing objective for Sōsekikō was to generate large revenue with a small profit

margin, toothpowder was probably already in the mature stage of the product life cycle.

The primary advertising objective is persuasion; Gennai tried to convince potential users of Sōsekikō to switch from competing brands. The copy is aimed at increasing the level of credibility by implicitly mentioning Gennai, a celebrity and opinion leader of the time, as the source of information. The copy also hints at Gennai's effort for controlling the audience's level of expectation for the product performance. Gennai knew the power of positive word-of-mouth advertising and explicitly requested the audience to spread a good rumor to their fellow consumers. The advertising appeals to the audience's ninjō, or feelings of humanity. Townspeople of Edo were proud of their humane Edokko katagi, or Edoite's spirit, and when in conflict between giri (moral obligations) and ninjō (humanity), it was often considered virtuous to choose the latter over the former. Therefore, Gennai's copy, which begins and ends with a somewhat pathetic tone and begs for the audience's sympathy, must have been emotionally involving for the humane Edoite audience.

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