Asia Business Intelligence

Yoshihiro Nakamizu
Owner

Bonsai Network Japan

Industry: Service
Revenue 2006: ¥50,000,000
Location: Saitama, Japan
Established: June 2000
Employees: 2
URL: www.j-bonsai.com

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Entrepreneur turning small trees into big business

Bonsai, a word which translates literally as "tray growing," has always been more of an art form than an enterprise.
Well, that was before Japanese bonsai enthusiast **Yoshihiro Nakamizu**, owner of ***Bonsai Network Japan***, turned his bonsai hobby into a business that earned over 50 million yen in 2006.

In this ***Asia Intel*** newsletter, business reporter **Jonathon Walsh** outlines how an innovative Japanese entrepreneur is turning small plants into a business that has a potential market numbering millions worldwide.

Launched in June 2000 after Nakamizu identified a huge market niche, Bonsai Network Japan provides people who have an interest in the art with access to the real world of bonsai in Japan.
The company achieves this by marketing and selling bonsai, garden plants and bonsai-related products to domestic and international clients, running English-speaking bonsai tours, workshops and demonstrations for foreign bonsai enthusiasts, managing an English-capable bonsai school in Shizuoka, and assisting in the dispatch of Japanese bonsai masters to other countries.

Massive global market

Bonsai Network Japan is a unique business run by a unique entrepreneur in a unique position – Nakamizu is the only bilingual bonsai businessman in Japan who is actively promoting the art to foreign countries. This means that if English-speaking foreigners want to find out information or purchase bonsai products or services from Japan, Nakamizu is virtually their only viable point of contact.

PTO…

Bonsai workshop for foreign nationals

On the back of an apparent worldwide bonsai boom, Nakamizu estimates there are approximately 10 million bonsai lovers of all ages worldwide, most of who learn the art from the Japanese model – and the numbers are growing.

Market niche identified at art gallery

So, why did Nakamizu start a business based around a traditional art generally perceived as a hobby for elderly Japanese? "Since I became interested in bonsai in 1993, I have visited the Kokufu exhibition, the world's largest bonsai exhibition, at Tokyo's Ueno Art Gallery every February," Nakamizu explains.

He quickly came to notice that many of the foreign visitors had little or no contacts in Japan, and subsequently realized there was a huge niche business opportunity to become an interface between the world of Japanese bonsai and overseas bonsai lovers.

So, doing the business equivalent of jumping off a cliff, he abandoned his salaryman's lifestyle after 24 years, established his own company and has never looked back.

No loans, guiding advice

Zeroing in on some of the many obstacles he has faced while growing his business, Nakamizu recalls how due to the extremely specialized market niche his business operates in, he couldn't obtain a bank loan and there was no one who could teach him how to run his new company. These roadblocks, combined with a multitude of others, made it a real challenge to earn sufficient income, let alone turn a profit.

To overcome these hurdles, Nakamizu says he has worked very hard to meet customers' expectations and has never turned down any of their requests. "I have made quite a few mistakes and experienced failures and even disasters because of insufficient knowledge and experience," he says, "but thanks to these experiences, I could surmount many of these challenges. I think the experience gained has been a valuable asset to me."

BUSINESS SOLUTIONS

Three most important lessons:

- ***Work for people, not just for money.***
- ***Make quick decisions*** – "We do not spend too much time thinking which particular action to take if it feels like the "right" thing to do. If we think too much about new things, the result tends to turn out to be negative."
- ***Always ask for payment in advance.*** "Even if we get very friendly with our clients, we should never agree to receive payment later on. In international business, payment should always be made in advance."

What are the most effective methods Nakamizu has found to:

- ***Find staff***

"I always make it a rule to find staff through parties. I am a party-goer, and we can find very talented staff through casual chat at parties."

- ***Advertise***

"We do not advertise ourselves at all because we do not have enough people to meet the demand coming from other countries. At the moment, the information we spread through the Internet is good enough to secure sufficient orders."

- ***Find customers***

"We find a few new customers almost every week through the Internet. Word-of-mouth seems to be working, too. The market we are dealing with is such a niche one, and not so many people are supplying the services we do."

What key points do wannabe entrepreneurs need to know before starting a business in Japan?

"First, business niches can usually be found only in the international marketplace. Competition is very difficult when you try to find a business niche only in this country. But when you think globally, many business opportunities will appear."

What key entrepreneurial qualities does Nakamizu believe are crucial for entrepreneurs in Japan?

- Command of English.
- Being health conscious and doing moderate exercise everyday.
- An attitude of working to support others rather than ourselves. Doing so ensures we earn money.

Nakamizu showing guests around Yorozu-en nursery, Saitama

KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

- Opening the door to authentic Japanese bonsai to world bonsai enthusiasts.
- Enabling easy online shopping for bonsai-related products.
- Creating easy access to bonsai-related facilities.

PRODUCTS & SERVICES

- Bonsai and garden plants.
- Bonsai-related products, tools, pots, display-stands, etc.
- English-speaking bonsai tours for foreign bonsai enthusiasts.
- English speaking bonsai school for bonsai learners.

CONTACT INFORMATION

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