

MUJI

無印良品

BRANDS A TO Z

MUJI
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Brands A to Z: MUJI

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Supported by MUJI

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1980-2000 introduction

story

INTRODUCTION

MUJI was born in Japan. After supermarkets were introduced to Japan during the 1950s, there were endless disputes between supermarkets and manufacturers over the command of retail prices. For the first 30 years, however, both parties had no choice but to face the fact that most house brand products introduced by various supermarkets only took into account the interests of the manufacturer and distributor, but neglected the feedback from consumers. As a result, the products failed to secure continuous support from the consumers. In the years 1977 and 1978, the situation was so apparent that the supermarket house brand commercial products were regarded as "cheap but of poor quality" and their sales dropped to a rockbottom level.

Seiyu Supermarket was confronted with the same problem. However, in light of its co-operation with SEARS, a mega retailer from the US, Seiyu experienced a change in mindset with regards to product development. In other words, in order to secure consumer support, mere affordability would not do. Only the pursuit of quality, i.e. the creation of value-added commercial products, was the most essential.

In 1980, Seiji Tsutsumi, the president of Seiyu Supermarket, held a meeting with his friends in the creative line including Ikko Tanaka, Kazuko Koike, Masaru Amano and Takashi Sugimoto. Based on the concept of simplicity, they produced nine household products and 31 food items. They adopted the standard colours of black, white and khaki, followed by the message of environmental protection and simplicity. These products were unique compared to the vogue to pursue branded and luxurious products in Japan at that time. That was the beginning of MUJI.

However, to its creators' disappointment, its initial entry to the market did not record impressive sales figures. Tanaka recalled that there were only 40 MUJI items, which did not stand out amongst other commercial products in the market. Its simple packaging drew little attention as well. Besides, many outlets did not follow instructions from the headquarters. They were haphazard in displaying the products, thus hindering the sales of the newly-created MUJI.

Tanaka made a bold proposal that, in order for MUJI to truly become a strong brand, it must be stand out amongst the many products in the market. Therefore, two months after MUJI's entry into the market, Tsutsumi indicated to the MUJI developers during a dining event that outlets must be set up in fashion hotspots such as Aoyama and Roppongi.

Therefore, in 1982, MUJI products were distributed to other associate shops through wholesale. In the same year, MUJI designed its own bicycle that had the basic functions. This was MUJI's longest-selling product. MUJI shipped Taiwan-made parts to Japan for assembly, which greatly reduced its manufacturing costs. Its advertisements in top fashion magazines depicted models riding the simplistic and stylish bicycle. The simple and stylish look of the bicycle made it a hit with the consumers, and it became the single bestselling item for a long time. But that was not all...the following year saw the real beginning of MUJI's success. No one expected that in the 20 years that followed, the brand would grow increasingly stronger in a culture where having brands with prominent logos like Louis Vuitton was still dominant.

In June 1983, MUJI's first outlet was opened. The double-storey Aoyama premise that amounted to 102 square metres was designed by Ikko Tanaka and Takashi Sugimoto. Its external walls were constructed with nostalgic red tiles that were popular during the Meiji period, while its floorboards and shelves were made from recycled building materials torn down from old buildings in Shinshuu. Its ceiling and walls retained the original form of unpolished cement, and the pipelines were exposed. This was a perfect embodiment of MUJI's image.

The shop was so unique that it received wide media coverage. Meanwhile, MUJI's business concept of low prices and high quality was supported by youngsters and people from various age groups. The number of commercial products increased to 720 items. The performance of the Aoyama outlet exceeded its expected target by ten times, with its sales revenue hitting a record ¥120 million in the first year. The success of this outlet was a turning point for MUJI, after

which it gradually shifted from being a specialty counter in supermarkets to become a specialty shop doing direct sales on its own.

In June 1989, the Mujirushi Ryohin Division of Seiyu got out of the Seiyu supermarket system and was officially founded as the Ryohin Keikaku Co. Ltd.

In the early 1990s, people were tired of flamboyance. The exaggerated aesthetics that advocated quantity as the basis of beauty started to fade from the history of fashion landscape. The end of an extremism marked the beginning of another extremism, and thus prospered the style of simplicity. To yuppies who were fed up with pursuing brand names and an extravagant lifestyle, MUJI was refreshing and its lifestyle aesthetic of simplicity was well recognised.

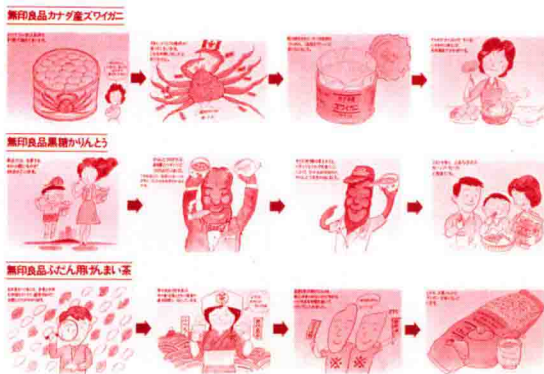
Soon, MUJI began to expand into an international brand. In July 1991, MUJI set up its first overseas branch in London, UK. The variety of its product lines increased rapidly. In 1995, MUJI launched household electrical appliances such as refrigerators, washing machines, telephones, electric cookers and microwave ovens. In 1999, MUJI stepped into the apparel industry and started to retail maternity dresses and children's wear. Its company shares were listed in 1995. In 2001, its co-operation with Nissan gave birth to the MUJI automobile. At that point, MUJI had become a truly international company and the number one grocery brand for many people.

Today MUJI stocks over 7,000 product items. They are mainly household products, emphasising the brand's concepts such as the ability to be recycled, extremely simple exterior and minimal wastage. It has no brand label in its packaging and product design, and has a variety of items ranging from stationery to basic kitchenware. Recently, MUJI made its foray into the building and architectural product lines. MUJI assumes a rather high status in Japan's lifestyle society. Apart from 172 direct sales outlets and 146 co-operative stores in Japan (as of February 2007), MUJI's outlets are also present in the UK, Ireland, France, Singapore, Taiwan, Korea, Hong Kong and so on. It is even found in the souvenir department of the Museum of Modern

Art in New York. In 2004 and 2005, MUJI set up outlets in Milan's Corso Buenos Aires and Shanghai's Nan Jing West Road. In 2007, MUJI entered the US market. Although all its outlets were located in fashionable metropolises, they created an atmosphere of natural simplicity. The modern, fast-paced life and hustle and bustle had given too much stress to people. So when people returned to their haven, they yearned for ample freedom and space for themselves, as well as to overcome trivialities. The simplicity advocated by MUJI perfectly meets the needs of this era.

Looking back at MUJI's origins and development process, it can be said that MUJI is the result of a highly competitive retail industry in Japan. It successfully created an emerging business entity in Japan's retail industry and posed an influence on consumer behaviour even in other regions. However, underlying its glory was MUJI's share of hardship that was unknown to others. For instance, MUJI's labels and packaging were once disputed by the media. In another instance, MUJI had withdrawn from Hong Kong completely due to the financial crisis.

Today, MUJI is widely favoured and appreciated, even by some renowned artists. In the course of it, MUJI made several interesting appearances in their artworks. For example, in the science fiction *Pattern Recognition* that was published in 2003 by Canadian-born US writer William Gibson, the protagonist wore MUJI clothes because he was super-sensitive to brands and trademarks.



Explanation of the MUJI concepts



Instant Coffee



First 40 items

Business Development

December: MUJI sales corners are established in the food and daily item sections of Seiyu stores. Meanwhile, Seibu Department Stores and Family Mart shops also started selling MUJI products.

Number of Items

Apparel: 0 / Household goods: 9 / Food: 31 (40 in total).

Main Products

Toilet Paper (12-roll set), Kitchen Wraps, Tissue Paper Refills, Fabric Softeners, Phosphorus-free Detergents, Liquid Detergents, Liquid Soaps, Toothbrush (five colours), Dried Shiitake Mushrooms (ware

shiitake), Canned Salmon, Instant Coffee, Soy Sauce, Karinto (sweet crunchy snack), Salad Oil, Ramen Noodles, Orange / Grape / Pineapple Drinks, Corn Snacks, Flavoured Seaweed, Flour, Curry Paste, Toasted Tea, Genmai (brown rice) Tea, Peanuts, Dried Bonito Packs, Canned Peaches, Boiled Red Beans, White Miso, Homemade Miso, Coffee Beans, Ceylon Tea Bags, Honey, Strawberry Jam, Buttered Peanuts, Canned Snow Crab Flakes, Canned Mushrooms.

MUJI's Advertising Message

"Lower priced for a reason."



Tights



Vanilla Candy



Chocolate-coated Peanuts



Crisps

Business Development

MUJI starts selling clothing items.
Sales corners for apparel and underwear sections
are established in Seiyu stores.

Number of Items

Apparel: 23 / Household goods: 30 / Food: 48
(101 in total).

Main Products

Men's Socks (five pairs), Tights (ten pairs), Men's
Scoop-neck Short-sleeve Shirts, Bibs,
Recycled Paper Memo Pads, Paper Dust Packs,
Nylon Sponge Cleaners, Laundry Soap,
Seaweed Sheets, Crisps, Vanilla Candy,
Chocolate-coated Peanuts, Smoked Squid.

MUJI's Advertising Messages

"In love with no frills."
"Salmon – all parts edible."



Mens' Socks