

Self-promotion No Longer Leaves a Bad Taste:  
Ajinomoto's CSR Activity in Japanese Schools

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### **Abstract**

Generally Japanese society does not value or encourage self-promotion. Therefore, Japanese corporations are generally quiet about corporate social responsibility (CSR). One Japanese multinational manufacturer of seasoning, Ajinomoto, does not fall into this category. Unlike the majority of the Japanese business community, Ajinomoto trumpets their CSR in the public sector. The top Japanese corporations normally choose not to pronounce their CSR, believing that it is not necessary to highlight their CSR activities if the company is basically doing what is considered the “right thing” for society. For this reason, Ajinomoto was selected for study because the case is unusual from cultural and business standpoints. This research utilizes two traditional qualitative data: documents and observations. The inquiry finds that Ajinomoto is distinctive in terms of CSR communication. Ajinomoto employees conduct food education lessons in public elementary schools and remind children and teachers of the importance of traditional Japanese food culture. They have face-to-face meetings with school officials in advance. They clearly communicate with teachers regarding the concept of corporate social responsibility and most importantly, they conduct lessons without overt product promotion. This case may identify a new chapter in the history of Japanese CSR.

*Keywords:* corporate social responsibility (CSR), business communication, public policy, Japan

### Self-promotion No Longer Leaves a Bad Taste:

#### Ajinomoto's CSR Activity in Japanese Schools

Japanese corporations are generally quiet about “doing good” for society or what is termed “corporate social responsibility (CSR).” One Japanese multinational manufacturer of seasoning, Ajinomoto, does not fall into this category. Ajinomoto, unlike the majority of the Japanese business community, goes out into the public sector and trumpets their CSR. Generally Japanese society does not value or encourage self-promotion. Ajinomoto, however, goes out into the public sector and successfully self-promotes their CSR activities for the betterment of society.

### Japanese Cultural Identity

Since the 1990s, Japanese society has been very concerned about losing traditional Japanese food cultural identity due to the overwhelming inflow of Western food culture and the dramatic lifestyle changes such as the emerging women's role in the workplace (Sugihara, 1999). This led to a growing number of middle-age white collar households that did not want Japanese cooking at home because it normally takes more time than Western cooking (“Konbu No,” 2006; Sugihara, 1999). In response to the growing concern, a new food education law called “*Shokuiku Kihon Ho*” was created in 2005 to promote healthy diets such as that of traditional Japanese food (Cabinet Office, Government of Japan, 2006). Many food manufacturers took this opportunity to reach out to school-aged children and contacted public schools, for the purpose of implanting a positive image of traditional Japanese food culture in the minds of children.

### Literature Review

Japanese business leaders had the basic CSR principle identified during the 17<sup>th</sup> century Edo period. The Edo period business leaders put public benefit over their business interest (Okamoto, 2008). Corporate Japan, however, was not familiar with the new Western concept of

CSR and did not begin CSR activities until 2003 (Tanimoto, 2006). Interestingly, research suggests that the majority of the top Japanese corporations choose not to pronounce their CSR activities (CSR WeltWeit, 2012; Fukukawa & Teramoto, 2009; Tokoro, 2007) because they believe that it is not necessary to highlight their CSR if the company is doing the right thing for society (Fukukawa & Teramoto, 2009). Even some current employers in Japan hesitate to hire new graduates who are too vocal about a company's CSR and instead, they believe that the candidates who are very serious about CSR never mention the word "CSR" (Itsumi, 2013).

A previous study was conducted by this researcher regarding the CSR activities of major Japanese food manufacturers involved with schools during the period 2008-2011. It included contacting more than 300 elementary schools and the interviewing in excess of 70 public school teachers who had experienced corporate food education lessons. Based on their interviews, one company stood out: Ajinomoto, an internationally known manufacturer of seasoning. The teachers who experienced Ajinomoto's food education lesson stated that they had learned about the concept of CSR directly from Ajinomoto employees. For example, one teacher specifically mentioned, "Ajinomoto's food education is its corporate social responsibility, and is not a profit seeking activity." It was surprising that this teacher acted and spoke as if he was a corporate representative. Public school teachers are regarded as public servants, who generally have nothing to do with business people. Who implanted this idea into his mind? What exactly were these corporate instructors talking about with the teachers and the children in the classroom? In order to understand this unique phenomenon, Ajinomoto was selected as a case for observational purposes.

## Method

This case study utilizes two traditional qualitative data: documents and observation. Documents used for analysis include the company's website, school's website, and internal documents directly obtained from participants. Although documents reflect biased selectivity and unknown bias of the author, the benefit of using documents is to corroborate and augment evidence from other sources (Yin, 2009).

A case study is an in-depth exploration of a bounded system such as an activity, event, process, or individuals, and a case may be selected for study because the case is unusual and has merit in and of itself (Creswell, 2005). Because Ajinomoto's CSR activity stood out as an unusual social phenomena and the researcher attempted to optimize understanding of the cases rather than the opportunity to generalize beyond them (Stake, 2006), Ajinomoto was selected as a case. Observation is the process of gathering firsthand information by observing people and places at a research site (Creswell, 2005). Observational research is, however, time-consuming (Yin, 2009), expensive and difficult to conduct for complex behavior (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). Recognizing these disadvantages, this researcher highly values the primary advantages of the observational method such as the opportunity to study actual behaviors (Creswell, 2005), without worrying about the limitations of self-report bias from interview data (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). Therefore, permission was obtained from several school administrators based on IRB approval, and multiple schools were visited for observation of their food education lessons called mikaku kyoushitsu [flavor lesson] during the period 2010 and 2013.

## **Findings: CSR in Public Schools**

### **About the Company and Flavor Lesson**

Ajinomoto is a leading seasoning maker and has operations worldwide. The company has been in business more than 50 years. Their signature product, also named Ajinomoto, is umami seasoning, made of monosodium glutamate. The product became very controversial in the 1960s and it received significant criticism regarding a safety issue. Because of the issue, the company suffered a sales decline for many years and has had difficulty in obtaining a positive corporate image since then (Kubota, 2010). The company started to provide a food education lesson called “flavor lesson” at elementary schools in 2006 after the food education law was enacted. The company website shows the lesson demo video and the lesson plan, which contains three parts: five basic flavors (15 minutes), discovery of *umami* as the fifth basic taste discovered by a Japanese scientist (15 minutes), and tasting experiment (15 minutes). The website also shows the covers of three different textbooks which pertain to specific grade levels. The lesson allows children to engage in a tasting activity and reminds them of the important role of this *umami* in Japanese traditional food, and the positive aspects of Japanese food culture (Ajinomoto, 2010). Children are allowed to touch very expensive kelp and dried bonito, which are ingredients of umami. The kelp exhibited by Ajinomoto is rare and not available in grocery stores.

### **Observation of Flavor Lessons**

According to the interviewed teachers in the previous research, Ajinomoto employees had multiple contacts about the lesson with public school teachers (Takano, 2011). The first major contact occurs when Ajinomoto employees go to the school for a meeting, after the school applies for and is accepted for the flavor lesson. At this advance meeting, teachers learn about the purpose, the lesson content, and receive textbooks for the different grade levels for review.

Also this is the first time the teachers hear the expression, “corporate social responsibility,” directly from the company (Takano, 2011).

The second of the face-to face contacts with Ajinomoto employees is when the Ajinomoto employees go to the schools as food education instructors and talk about corporate social responsibility. Based on the observations, before the lessons, Ajinomoto employees were invited to the principal’s office to introduce themselves, and had time for small talk with the teachers. One particular day, four Ajinomoto employees came to the school in which the researcher was conducting an observation. A male Ajinomoto instructor, who looked like a middle-manager had just finished a lesson, had a break and began talking over a cup of green tea. A teacher asked the Ajinomoto employee, “It may not be easy to get the budget for this activity because it is costly. How do you manage all the expenses?” The man replied, “Our PR Department takes care of all the expense. Each department does not have to deal with it. Otherwise, we would not be able to do this. As you know, this is part of our corporate social responsibility activity. Our top management strongly believes in this and we all have a commitment to this food education program. Well, I have to go back to my work, so may I excuse myself. ” He thanked the teacher for the tea, and left the school. The rest of the day young employees conducted the lessons.

The final contact from Ajinomoto was a request for a survey to be completed, after they had conducted all the flavor lessons in the school. A copy of the survey was provided to the researcher by the teacher. It had only five questions regarding the lesson content and the instructor’s skills, and asked the teacher whether or not they wanted to have this lesson again in the very near future. There was no question about product image.

In most cases, there are three to four lessons on the same day. Consequently, Ajinomoto employees tend to eat school lunch at their own expense and spend time with the teachers. One day, the researcher had a chance to eat with the Ajinomoto employees. A young female employee spoke after we started eating. “This is our corporate social responsibility. I work in the Sales Department, but I wanted to do this so I volunteered as an instructor. It is fun!” She appeared very proud of herself. The classroom teacher said to me that this female employee can be a good teacher due to her excellent instructional skills. Another female employee revealed that Ajinomoto instructors received one-day training to learn how to change difficult words into easy ones so young children would understand.

Often during lesson observations, employees reveal their real motivation behind their CSR activity. At a school in an urban area, one young male employee, in his late twenties, spoke to this researcher during the break between the lessons. He was very polite, and provided his business card. He said that the company was providing the lesson because it wanted to eliminate the negative image of its signature product, Ajinomoto (monosodium glutamate) due to problematic publicity in the past. He did not make it clear regarding what caused the negative corporate image, however, it was apparent he was talking about a controversial safety issue. He observed another employees’ lesson and then conducted his last lesson of the day. He appeared very nervous at first, but his interaction with children was very engaging, and the children seemed very happy learning about the nature of flavors through tasting, smelling, and touching. The male employee acted like a first-year teacher who is excited about being in the classroom and truly enjoys teaching.



One day, a nutrition teacher at the school stopped by to observe the Ajinomoto's flavor lesson. She stated, "I expected some degree of promotion because they are business people, but it looks like there is no promotion whatsoever."

Ajinomoto employees came to conduct food education lessons and reminded children and teachers of the important role of umami in Japanese food culture. They came for a meeting in advance, they clearly communicated with teachers regarding the concept of corporate social responsibility, and they conducted lessons without any product promotion.

### **Discussion: Success of Ajinomoto's CSR**

Contributors to the success of Ajinomoto CSR were identified from the observations regarding CSR activity. First, the company was able to input positive images in the minds of the children, teachers, and the parents who came to school to observe the lesson by purposely NOT promoting any of their products. Based on observations of the corporate lessons conducted by Calbee (a leading Japanese potato chip maker) and Kikkoman (a leading soy sauce maker), their signature products were displayed in front of children (Takano, 2012). Ajinomoto's flavor lesson functions, however, as an effective promotion for the company without displaying any of their products! This is because Japanese public schools have been regarded as "sacred places" where corporate presence was, for many years, unwelcomed, and it still is in many ways. However, Ajinomoto's activities were clearly welcomed. Ajinomoto identified as social needs: the promotion of healthy diets and preservation of traditional Japanese food culture. Utilizing their corporate resources and expertise, Ajinomoto provides food education lessons in public schools as a CSR activity.

Another important aspect is that Ajinomoto successfully self-promotes their CSR activities for the betterment of society. Scholars who study CSR in Japan continue to argue that

the Japanese business community tends to engage in an implicit CSR approach whereas Western counterparts prefer an explicit approach of communicating CSR within the society (Fukukawa & Teramaoto, 2009; Takano, 2013; Todeschini, 2011). There are three primary reasons behind why being quiet about “doing good” or corporate social responsibility activity is the norm in Japan. First, self-promotion is regarded as in bad taste. Endorsement by government or highly recognized professionals without self-publicity is the best way to promote an organization (Cooper-Chen & Tanaka, 2008). Because Japanese culture militates against self-promotion and PR skills have not fully developed in Japan, the lack of self-promotion may lead to misunderstanding among people with different cultural values (Taguchi, 1995). Second, Japan is a high context culture, where non-verbal communication (i.e. face-to-face interactions) is highly valued and people do not require much detailed, explicit information. High context cultures tend to be more concerned with building reputation and establishing trust over time, instead of spelling out positive activities (McFarlin & Sweeney, 2011). Third and finally, Japan is a collective-oriented culture. Collectivist cultures tend to be more publicly conscious and feel many obligations to others, and speaking for themselves should be avoided and communicating respect for the whole society is highly valued, rather than simply the good for the organization (Ferraro & Briody, 2013). Naturally, the success or failure of the food education movement is a team affair in Japan. Japanese food makers take their responsibility seriously. As a team member of the Japanese society, so does Ajinomoto.

Ajinomoto is distinctive in terms of CSR communication. Ajinomoto employees conduct food education lessons and remind children and teachers of the important role of umami in Japanese food culture. They have face-to-face meetings with school officials in advance. They clearly communicate with teachers regarding the concept of corporate social responsibility and

most importantly, they conduct lessons without overt product promotion. It should be noted, as previously discussed, that generally self-promotion by speaking to a general audience may not work. Ajinomoto, however, targeted public school teachers and communicated their social contribution effectively to them. In fact, Ajinomoto's endorsed CSR by the public domain has successfully improved their reputation over time (Takano, 2011) and presents a good example of an effective CSR strategy within the Japanese business culture.

### **Conclusion**

Previous research suggested that the Japanese business community tends to engage in an implicit approach and chooses not to talk about CSR. Ajinomoto, however, does just the opposite. Surprisingly they trumpet their social contribution, and communicate it effectively in the public sector. Ajinomoto capitalized on the opportunity of the new food education law which promotes healthy diets that include Japanese food, and reached out to school teachers, children and their parents. Utilizing their corporate expertise, the company produced creative lesson plans without overt product promotion, and improved their corporate image through CSR activities in the public sector. Japan's unique combination of cultural traits such as being a high context and collective-oriented society along with the new food education law contributed to the uniqueness of this case. This case may identify a new chapter in the history of Japanese CSR. It possibly presents a very interesting future for research by Asian and CSR researchers.

### **Research Limitations and Implication for Future Research**

This case study is limited to two schools that invited Ajinomoto's lesson and viewed it in a positive light. It is understandable that it is difficult to generalize the findings to other school settings because the number of research sites is very small. Instead of depending on a single site, this researcher visited two different locations with four lessons covering different grade levels.

Analytic conclusions independently arising from two or more cases will be “more powerful than those coming from a single case alone” (Yin, 2009, p.61). As a consequence, this researcher believes this case still presents valuable insights into current CSR activities in Japan. Future research is recommended specifically regarding follow-up interviews with school officials who decided not to re-invite Ajinomoto after they experienced their program. Additionally, corporate representatives who are responsible for their CSR activities may provide different insights regarding Ajinomoto’s CSR activity.

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