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# Muji: The No-Brand Brand

One of the strongest retail brands in the world is Muji. BrandJapan has measured brand strength for 1,100 brands in Japan for eight years. Muji always has ranked in the top 30—and usually in the top 20—a consistency shared by only three other retail brands. After opening its first store in 1983 as a subsidiary of supermarket retailer Seiyu, it has since been sold and now has more than 330 stores, nearly a third of which are outside Japan, including several locations in New York. Few brands deliver more emotional and self-expressive benefits than does Muji. Yet, the Muji brand vision is not to be a brand. It is the no-brand brand.

Muji, short for Mujirushi Ryohin, is represented by four characters that mean “no-brand quality goods.” The values are all about simplicity, moderation, humility and self-restraint. The Muji philosophy is to deliver functional products that strive not to be the best, but “enough.” Enough does not mean compromise and resignation but a feeling of satisfaction knowing that the product will deliver what is needed but no more. Superfluous features and attributes unrelated to function are omitted. The aspiration is to achieve the extraordinary by modesty and plainness in the pursuit of the pure and ordinary.

A visit to a Muji store in Japan is an eye-opener. One of the first things you notice is that the clothes are all bland, mostly white or beige and never bright. Beige works. There is no logo on shirtfronts; in fact, there are no labels at all, even on the inside. Why would you want a label? The furniture, cookware and office equipment are plain but functional. The designs are simple, but not for some minimalist statement (see photos). They just provide what is needed to deliver function. Periodically, there is a Muji design competition that regularly gets 2,000 entrants and results in products for the store that support the Muji philosophy and lifestyle. The prices are low not by using cheap materials or design, but by cutting frills and using design with the right objectives.

The store setting supports the products and the philosophy. The background music is soothing. The ambiance is relaxing and delivers emotional benefits that are very Japanese, but also travel well. In essence, Muji is a lifestyle brand without the usual associated energy. It is very different from the loud visuals and sounds that come with a visit to Abercrombie & Fitch, for example.

Not surprisingly, Muji is sensitive to the environment. It aspires to live in compatibility and sensitivity with the earth. Toward that end, it operates three large campgrounds in Japan that allow people to enjoy nature undisturbed. The campsites host Muji summer camp jamborees that bond Muji and the participants with nature.

Muji can be described as a reaction to the glitz of Tokyo’s Ginza shopping district and other shopping centers that are filled with brand after brand, each trying to be

more upscale than the last. In Japan, Muji is anti-glitz. The badge of Louis Vuitton is the polar opposite of Muji. Ironically, this desire to eliminate self-expressive benefits actually provides self-expressive benefits. Shopping at Muji and using Muji products make a forceful statement about who you are. You are above looking for badge brands. You are, rather, a rational person interested in the right values, and you choose to connect with a firm that is interested in promoting social good and satisfaction from life.

The fact that there has been little real competition shows the strength of the barriers Muji has created. Its values are both unique and compelling. They are not simply due to any one part of the line; there is no flagship product. Rather, it is a combination of everything that it does that emanates from its core values and culture. It would be impossible for Macy’s to carve out a section with a subbrand and deliver the Muji spirit and products. It just could not happen.

It is interesting to contrast Muji with IKEA, now the largest furniture store in the world, which also focuses on using design to deliver functionality and low price. However,

its brand and stores are oriented more toward functionality at a low price with its room design concepts, signature products, customer-assembly policy, programmed store layout and Swedish overlay, and therefore deliver a lesser emotional or self-expressive connection. IKEA is not a statement against ego-enhancing brands.

Muji is a most unusual brand story—a non-brand that delivers emotional and self-expressive benefits. Today’s trends make the story become even more interesting. Consumers have seen the downside of the debt-driven commercialism excesses of today’s society. There is almost a craving for the simple, away from the prideful and self-absorbed brand benefits and toward more satisfying values. A desire for fewer additives in food, for entertainment systems that are easy to operate, for less product confusion, for sustainable consumption and on and on, is becoming visible. It may be that the simple and unassuming may become more of a mainstream formula rather than a niche strategy. If so, Muji may become a brand role model that others look toward. **m**



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