

Taking Gifts to Japan:



37 Ways to Say “I care!”

This book is brought to you by:

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Coming soon, on December 20th, 2010



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Introduction

Gifts are essential in many countries, but never more so than Japan. It is a given.

It is a part of the culture. It is the nature of doing business in Japan. And, it definitely is a part of Japanese Business Etiquette and Japanese Business Customs.

Most people say it is an obligation. I say it is not. What I say is this: it is an opportunity!

Your gifts should tell a story. They should lead to a conversation about you that your hosts will not forget. This is the start of marketing yourself, before you earn the right to market your products.

This book is NOT about “just another” mindless list of things; it is intended to be both recommendations and reasons...hence more comprehensive than a “list.”

The Basics

There are a few points that you need to keep in mind. This is **before** you begin to actually select those gifts to take to Japan.

- **The most important first:** the presentation of a gift is meaningless if it doesn't make a statement. If it is forgotten, you lost a valuable opportunity to initiate a great relationship. Make it count.
- **The gift must have a personal element to it.** If it does, it won't get lost in the shuffle and you will be remembered.
- **The first series of gifts (during your first few times to Japan) are not to be corporate advertising.** You are selling yourself, first and foremost. So, I say it again: make it personal – it represents **YOU!** I will explain later.

- **The gift must always be made in your home country.** Do not take gifts made elsewhere – there’s too much of that already, and most of the time, it screams “cheap!”



- **Gifts cannot be trinkets.** They have all the ball-point-pens, mouse pads, etc., they need, even with your corporate logo!
- **Gifts must be properly wrapped.** Since you will be going through customs, leave them loose (unwrapped), then have your hotel concierge wrap them elegantly, the Japanese way. Yes, there is a Japanese way, and the wrapping is immaculate.
- **Make sure before you go that you know who you will be meeting.** Make sure you know how many people will be in attendance. Decide on whether or not you want to give individual gifts, or to the group as a whole.
- **It is better NOT to take gifts that make a religious or political statement.** You can share your beliefs later when you have earned their trust and they are more comfortable with you.

These basic points will guide you through the process of taking great gifts!

I cannot stress enough that this is **your opportunity** to get a little bit closer to your Japanese counterparts. It doesn’t matter if you are meeting them for the first time. Or, if it is your 10th time. **The gift is your window into their hearts, together with that terrific personality of yours.**



Make your gifts count!

Where Are You From?

Just like you, most of your Japanese counterparts will be very loyal to their upbringing. Their city or town; their high school; their university. They enjoy talking about where they are from, and so should you!

Gifts that are unique to your home town or school will lead to some fantastic conversations between you and your hosts. This is a great place to start in selecting your gifts.

Your Home State / Province, County, City or Town



1. **Pottery:** I start with this, because Japan prides itself in this area. Pottery; ceramics; china. These make for great gifts. If you have unique gifts in this genre native to your home town (or even country), then it's a perfect gift. It will definitely make a statement. It will be a conversation piece. It will not be forgotten. Local artists are perfect, even if they are not well known.
2. **Other crafts.** I am an American, native to Texas (well, my parents were, anyway – I was born in Japan). I also have some Cherokee and Choctaw Indian blood mixed in with my Irish roots. So I like to give gifts that reflect my Native American Indian roots. It's cultural, and they love it because this is unique.
3. **Food.** Taking food items into Japan is NOT recommended. However, there are a few exceptions:
 - a. **Confectionary,** particularly chocolates, biscuits, cookies, and the like might be appropriate if you are presenting a gift to the office staff. Make sure they are unique to your area; better yet if they are from your home town.
 - b. **Candies, sweeties, etc.,** should be selected only if you know whether or not your host has children. Ideally, you would have met the person before, on more than one occasion. Only then would you entertain giving an *additional* small gift like this to his/her kids.
4. **Beverages.** Not your first choice, either. But, there are some situations where you can.
 - a. **Teas, herb teas and other leaf-based drinks** that are unique to your home town, state or country. Just make sure they are



properly packaged, presented nicely and again, unique. Depending on what you take, there may be quarantine issues as well, so be careful.

b. **Alcohol.** I do not recommend alcoholic gifts. However, if it is unique (micro-brews & wines are good candidates) to your area and can tie into a personal conversation between you and your hosts about your home town or state, then it is okay. One caveat: for your first few visits, alcohol of any kind is not a good choice; you need to know them better before you take this type of gift. Also, there are limitations with the quantity you can take into Japan – above that limit, you will pay duty on the excess and it will cost you. (see [Japanese Customs & Immigration](#))

5. **Art.** Most home towns, states or counties have local artists in all sorts of genres that are not internationally known, but generate quality work. If that work is unique, they are perfect gifts and do not have to be expensive. It's a sure-fire way to create great camaraderie with your counterparts over there in Japan. Smaller items are better.



6. **Gifts from state parks and monuments.** I have seen phenomenal gifts that can be purchased from a state or regional park, and they tell a story. Even if they haven't heard of the park, it will give you an "in" in explaining more about your home region.

7. **Most cities have local festivals.** New Orleans is a perfect example. During those special festivals, gifts are abundant. Buy some and store them away, for future use. Make sure they are locally produced, and are quality items – again, not trinkets!

8. **Books about your home town.** I mention this again later, but these are great gifts. Make sure they are mostly pictorial, rather than heavily text-oriented. They won't read it, for the most part, but they will look. If it is prominently displayed in the reception room, or



on the coffee table at your host's home, the book will have a long shelf-life. Meaning, they will talk about it amongst themselves (and their guests) regularly – which means, you are NOT forgotten!

9. ***In general, look around you.*** What cultural aspects are unique to your locale? Are there gift items, locally produced, that connect to those topics or themes? If so, those items are prime candidates.

Your School



Most of my Japanese colleagues have always shown great interest in the educational background of my clients and friends. And mine, for that matter.

This is not a “snobbish” interest, but rather a curiosity of where you went to school, what you studied, and most importantly, what clubs and extra-curricular activities defined your passions at that time.

Many Japanese will talk, with great fondness, of their role on the high school or college (or both) rugby team, or participation in a choral club, or perhaps mountain climbing groups, etc. The list is endless.

Hence, everything you did at high school or college, is interesting. Use it wisely, and you can make your educational background a source for some very interesting gifts.

10. ***Schools have a history & culture.*** That history and that culture represent an opportunity for conversation. You might even find out that you shared some common background in the activities you participated in. Hence, any gift that would bring about this conversation is ideal.
11. ***Every school has a book / gift center.*** Look at all of the items on sale that represent the school. So long as they are made locally and are quality items, most would make appropriate gifts so long as they are not common items.

Who Are You?

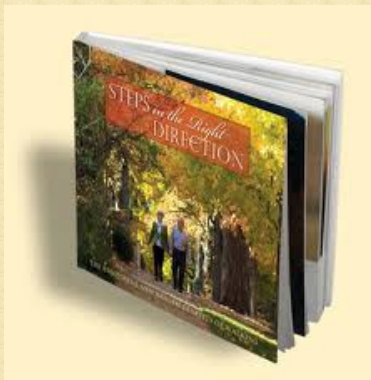
You are partly defined by your interests and hobbies. What pleases you, will probably please them. Think of giving something that says, *"This is part of who I am."*

Interests & Hobbies

12. **Personally hand-made items (by you)** make a statement, so long as they are of quality and elegance. One of my clients was into maritime knots. He brought over several small frames containing 8 unique knots – each one with a label underneath. They were beautiful. But he didn't stop there. He made a little booklet that explained the usage of each knot, the history behind them, and instructions for making those knots. Needless to say, they were a huge hit.



13. **Books. Not just any book, but a photo-essay** or pictorial of your hobby or interest. If you are interested in bird watching, for example, then take a book that shows off your passion, but displays mostly pictures or photos. It will make for a great centerpiece for the coffee table in a Japanese home – or in the reception room at their office. It doesn't matter what your "hobby" is about, the important thing is that it contains limited text, and mostly pictures so that they can enjoy it visually.



14. **If there are hobbies that are especially unique to where you live**, by all means any product that is connected to that hobby is a prime candidate. Again, just make sure the gift is made in your home country.
15. **There are "lists" on the internet which define hundreds of hobbies.** If a hobby exists, chances are many Japanese will either have similar interests, know someone in the family or their circle of

friends that do, or will have heard of it. If you run out of ideas, just do a search for those lists, and see if there is something unique to your locale.

Sports

Japanese people love sports. Products along this line can make a statement, too. Just don't take a bunch of baseball caps and pass them out!

I personally would limit any sports-related gift to: baseball, soccer, golf or any sport that is unique to your locale.

Baseball

16. ***They love baseball. Genuine MLB balls,*** autographed by a real major leaguer, is great for conversation. Just make sure the ball player is known in Japan, either past or present. And it should represent your home town, state or where you live.



17. ***Even if you are not from the U.S.,*** chances are that there will be a major leaguer in MLB that is from your country. Take advantage of it, as it leads to a story. Remember, there is some synergy here: the Japanese are very proud of their Japanese players who play in the U.S.; you should be proud of your compatriots, too.
18. ***Every ballpark will have unique gifts*** only available at that park, irrespective of country, state, province or city. As long as they are made in the home country, any such gift of quality is a great conversation piece. I have seen pennants, towels, limited-edition posters, etc., used effectively as gifts so long as they carry a story personal to you.



Soccer / Football

19. ***If you live in a city, state or province that happens to have a professional team,*** then gifts having to do with that team or pitch are okay.
20. ***Better yet, if that team happens to have a Japanese football player on it,*** or some internationally-recognized superstar, then get gifts related to that team member.

Golf

Golf is over-rated! Everyone thinks all Japanese play golf. Not true. But gifts from this genre of sport can be effective if chosen carefully.

21. ***Premium golf balls specific to a famous golf course,*** with the course logo and/or markings, can be great gifts. Augusta, Pebble Beach, St. Andrews, etc., are examples of prime candidates. Any major course on the PGA or LPGA tour would be good. Make sure they are a quality-boxed set.
22. ***All major golf courses have unique gifts*** that can only be bought at the course, or online direct from the club. So long as those gifts are made in your home country, they make good gifts. Example: tool sets.



Unique Sports - Specific to Your Locale

Many countries, states / provinces or cities have a sport (or two) that are very unique to that locale. Aussie football is one example that comes to mind. So is Jai Alai. Here are a few thoughts:

23. Again, ***any product connected to that unique sport*** that is of quality and "home-grown" makes for a great conversation piece. Hence, such gifts are always prime candidates.
24. ***Perhaps there is a very unique type of motorsport;*** or fishing; or some other sport or outdoor activity that is very special to your area,

possibly not heard of by your Japanese counterparts. Any book or sport-related product would be terrific. Japanese people are very curious about foreign cultures; anything along these lines that would raise their curiosity is a good choice to take with you.

25. ***Irrespective of the sport, there are certain events that are special,*** and everyone knows about them. Some examples would be: Royal Ascot; Kentucky Derby; Wimbledon; Super Bowl; Australian F1 GP; and many, many more. If you are from that country, any gifts specific to those special sporting events would do well.



National Identity Gifts




Putting "patriotisms" aside and contrary to many of my colleagues' views, I have never recommended gifts having to do with a "national" identity.

Why?

There are 3 reasons:

- ***They are usually not that personal to you.*** And besides, what can you buy that represents the country, but yet is made locally? Most such gift items are made overseas due to large quantities vs. cost. However, if you find such items and you are pretty sure your counterparts have never seen them, then it might work (see the next point).
- ***Chances are, your host will have already been to your country.*** They travel a lot, so it is very likely that they would have returned to Japan with a suitcase full of such items.
- ***Given the above, the gift most likely will be too weak*** to create some type of unique dialogue between you and your counterparts. I see this as a lost opportunity. I have never gone down this line, and I believe you would be best served by sticking to something more "at home" and personal to you.

Further Thoughts – General Suggestions

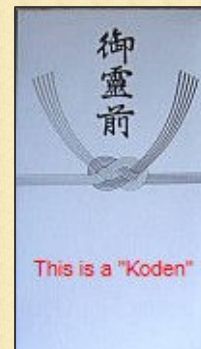
26. **Personalized stationery is a good gift** once you get to know your counterparts. It shows preparation; any type of personalization exudes that “warm & fuzzy” feeling. Not for the first few visits, though. It might be just a bit too personal until you’ve been there a few times.
27. **If it is possible to find out what your host likes** (interests, etc.), then that would be ideal. However, most Japanese people will not tell you that at first, even if you ask. Tread softly before you go and ask them about gifts.
28. **Best not to take flowers.** On my blog, I talk about this hazard. Many flowers are meant for funerals, wakes and gravesites, so it is not worth the risk of offending someone.
- 
29. **Don’t take things that are not easily shared.** Many lists you will see talk about jams, jellies and other similar items. I do not recommend this because it is too much of a hassle for those that receive it. And it is likely that someone not specifically connected to your business will be told by the boss to take it home. If so, you’ve lost an opportunity.
30. **Don’t take anything that is electronic,** a gadget or some other device. They can buy better things in Akihabara for less than you paid, and your gift will most likely get thrown in a drawer, never to be seen again.
31. **Did you know?**
- a. Yes, we take gifts when we go to Japan. But **there are also 2 major gift-giving seasons as well.** While they may not be required of you (it is obligatory for the Japanese themselves), if you do honor those gift seasons, it will set you apart from your competitors. Best to do it, if you can. Those seasons are:
 - i. **Ochūgen –summer gift-giving season;** usually given at the end of July or early August. Vendors and suppliers will always give gifts to their clients.

- ii. ***Oseibo – end of the year gifts.*** Usually given before the New Year’s holidays begin (which is from Dec. 28 – Jan. 5).
 - b. ***In Japan, another custom is to send New Year’s Greetings cards.*** They are sent in the form of a post card, usually purchased at the Japanese Post Office because they are printed with a bar-coded lottery ticket on them. These cards are called “nengajō.”
 - c. ***There is no tradition for Christmas*** or other religious holiday cards to be sent, though these days many younger people have adopted Christmas cards as a new thing to do. When you send cards for holiday greetings to Japan, it is best to send cards with a “New Year” theme, or something generic like “Season’s Greetings.”
- 32. ***You may find yourself in Japan during these gift-giving seasons.*** You may already have given them a gift from your home country when you met them. However, do yourself a favor and go back with a “seasonal” gift! By doing so, you will have shown your understanding and appreciation of the traditional protocols & customs. They will be impressed. Go to any major department store; you will see mounds of seasonal gifts (exotic fruits; cakes & cookies; teas; coffees; beverages; etc.). Just get gifts that are traditionally Japanese for such occasions.
- 33. ***During gift exchanges, the “opening” of gifts is not automatic.*** If you are the one receiving the gift, your Japanese counterpart might be embarrassed if you open it. Why? Because they might feel their gift is “unworthy” of praise or gratitude (very traditional self-effacing conduct in Japan). Hence, always ask if you may open it. Likewise, when you give a gift to them, they most likely will not open it at first. So, you must encourage them to open it. If you do not, you will lose the opportunity for that unique gift to be a topic of conversation.
- 34. ***Wedding gifts.*** If you are lucky enough (or close enough to your counterpart) to be invited to a wedding, please do not take a “physical” gift. That is NOT customary in Japan. Instead, the proper protocol is to give a monetary gift (I always recommend the standard

amount, which is ¥30,000 – and the bills must be brand new and crisp – you can get new bills at any bank; do NOT give old and crumpled bills). There is a way to do this: go to a stationery, department or convenience store and purchase a traditional gift envelope for a wedding. They are called “oshūgi bukuro.” Place the money inside, taking care not to damage the ornamental bow. Write your name and amount enclosed in small letters (in black ink) at the bottom of the back of the envelope. When you get to the venue, there will be a reception desk. Present the envelope to the receptionist (usually a friend of the bride) and then sign the guest book. When you depart, in return you will be given a gift called a “hikidemono” as a sign of gratitude from the bride and groom for your attendance.



35. **Funerals.** Though technically you do not give a “gift” at funerals, there is an obligation to take condolence money to a funeral if you are asked to attend. In this case, the condolence money is a small amount, no more than ¥3,000 or ¥5,000 (do NOT, under any circumstance, give ¥4,000 – a “4” is a sign of death.....). Once again, there is a special envelope for this, too – called a “koden.” Just go to a store (same places as mentioned in 34, above) and buy one, place the money inside (does not have to be new bills this time) and repeat the process as with weddings. Name; amount; etc. In black ink, small letters and legible but inconspicuous. And always at the bottom of the back of the envelope.



36. **If you are invited to a home.** If you are in Japan and you happen to get invited to a home that you did not expect, take fruit. Not just any fruit from a supermarket, but a nicely-boxed set of high-standard fruit that you can buy in any department store. These are prepared specifically as gifts.
37. **Gift sizes.** Care must be taken to take gifts that are manageable in terms of size. This is important if you give a gift intended specifically for the person, rather than the office. They may choose to take it

home. If they do, they will be going home rather late, and on a crowded train. Make it easy on them if at all possible.

Anecdotes

I would like to share with you two really amazing anecdotes. You will see that the act of "giving a gift" is truly an **art**.

If you master this "art," it can produce some phenomenal results.

The "Super Hero" Gift

One of my American friends was coming to Japan. He owned a media company. He was also one of the most famous creators of superheroes worldwide.

His Japanese counterpart had everything. What do you give to a man like that? It was important to make a good impression, as there was a lot at stake.

I was asked what to do. I simply told him to do what he does best. Make a unique Super Hero character out of his Japanese counterpart's personality; call it "Super Tendo" (Tendo was the man's first name).

So, when he came to Japan, he brought some really impressive posters; all original artwork. But, he also brought a 10-minute original animation made from JavaScript of that unique Super Tendo hero character.

Tendo was absolutely thrilled. Talk about bragging rights to his friends and colleagues in Japan! He was the "man-about-town" and he used it.

After all, who has a personal, unique, superhero created around them, from the world-famous creator of Spider Man?

Results?

The media company got a \$5 million investment from Tendo!

Make it count!

The Return of "Super Tendo"

The next time Tendo visited with the man in the U.S. who created his "Super Tendo" character, I was asked once again to give some ideas for gifts.

I knew that Tendo was fiercely loyal to his home prefecture. I also knew that he was a supporter of a young artist who was a potter. Not well known, but this man produced some very unique pieces of art.

I suggested that he have some unique pottery created for his trip to the U.S. So, this is what Tendo did.

1. He took a photo of Stan to the potter.
2. The potter took the photo to a temple to seek a priest's advice
3. The priest gave a reading on the "aura" surrounding Stan
4. The potter then, with that reading in mind, gathered local clay
5. He then used that clay to create something very unique
6. He then made a very special box out of Japanese pine
7. His wife made a silk cover / bag for the potter's artwork

This work of art was presented to Tendo; it took about 2 weeks to create it.

I saw it; it was one of the most stunning gifts I had ever seen. Tendo took this to the U.S. and presented it to Stan, who was overwhelmed.

Tendo went back to Japan with full digital rights to the media company's creative assets.

Gifts should tell a story; both of these do! And, if done with care and thought, they can help to move forward a mutually-prosperous relationship.

Make it count!

Giving a gift is NOT an obligation; it is an opportunity!

Yes, it is customary to give gifts to your counterparts in Japan. It is, simply put, "good business." It observes one major facet of Japanese Business Etiquette and Japanese Business Protocols.

But, many people see this tradition as an obligation. Hence, they give it very little thought. In fact, I read an article by a government trade agency (I won't say which one.....) where they were advising their countrymen about what they needed to do when they go to Japan. It was written on their website, in plain English.

Basically, they said that giving gifts was not necessary, but if they must, just take simple items like pens, USB sticks, etc., with corporate logos. They even had the audacity to say that "It would be a good way to advertise."

No, no, no!

That's just plain wrong, folks. If a government is giving this type of bad advice, no wonder people screw up all the time.

Those items will simply be pitched in a drawer, or will be given away to someone else who has nothing to do with you. What kind of "I care" does that show? More like, "I don't!"

And it says nothing about you personally, the individual that handed those things out in the first place. The only thing it might say is that you couldn't be bothered with it.

This is what 90% of the people do, when they go to Japan. And guess what? It's a big "yawn" for the Japanese who have to receive this junk.

And yet, they have to smile at you "in gratitude." They have to say how much they like the stuff – though they don't, and suffer more wasted time because **you** wasted **their** time by giving that stuff to them in the first place.

I have **NEVER** given a gift that **didn't** have some unique, personal element attached to it. I have always advised my clients to do the same.

And I have yet to give a gift that hasn't resulted in a more rewarding (and personal) conversation with my hosts, customers or colleagues.

It can't "help but help" - to produce results. After all, it is a statement of who I am, and where I come from. And they know that much thought was given... **to them!**

This, to the Japanese, IS interesting and it gets you further down the road than simply chucking a pen at them. Which brings me to saying:

Your Gift.....must.....

"Make a Statement."

"Say Something Personal" About You.

Then, and only then, "Will it Count!"

You have received this because you subscribed to our Newsletter. Thank You!
I hope that the newsletter will be helpful, enlightening, and fun!

For more information about "Doing Business in Japan – The Successful Way!" please keep coming back to our blog, and add your comments, at:

www.doingbusinessinjapan.org

You can also reach me by using the Contact Form on the website. I answer emails where possible.

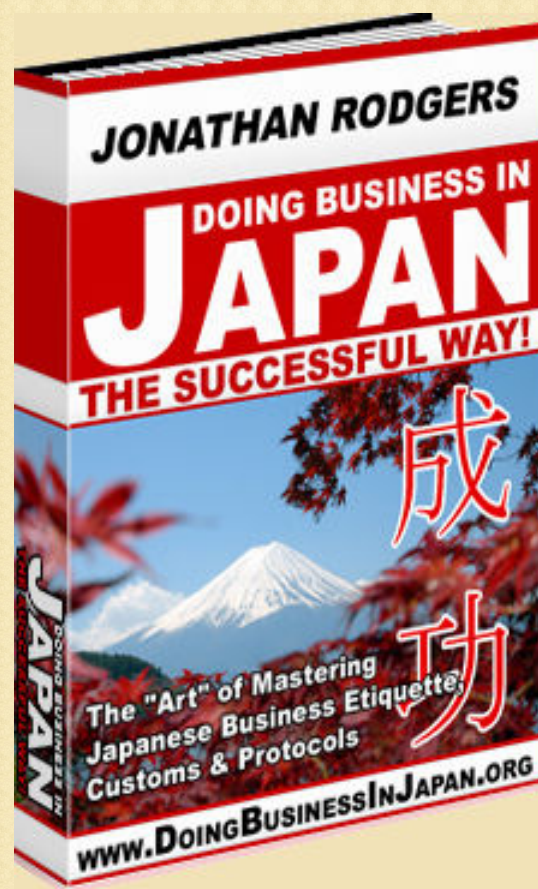
To Your Success,
Best Wishes,
Jonathan

P.S. If you haven't done so already, don't forget to reserve your copy of my unique eBook, titled:

Doing Business in Japan – The Successful Way!

The "Art" of Mastering Japanese Business Etiquette, Customs & Protocols.

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