

By Kumi Matsumaru
Daily Yomiuri Staff Writer

It was during a stint at a Tokyo real estate agency while in college that Toshinori Kawada became aware that landlords often refuse to rent to foreigners. "That's the case at many real estate agencies," he says. "They [the landlords] blame language difficulties or stereotype foreigners as being unable to abide by rules, and ultimately they just strike them from the list of prospective tenants."

"I decided to do what I could to solve the problem by working as an intermediary between non-Japanese house hunters and real estate agencies and landlords who would consider them as tenants if their concerns could be alleviated."

Kawada first tried the volunteer route by working through an organization that helped foreigners find apartments. He soon discovered how inflexible and slow-moving such organizations could be as they had no real sense of urgency.

He decided to instead go into business for himself, as it seemed a more effective way to provide the services he thought were necessary. He enrolled in an entrepreneurship course and, in November 2006, set up The-You.

The-You acts as a sort of interpreter and mediator between foreign tenants and Japanese landlords, providing a variety of support services for them for ¥30,000 for the first year and ¥10,000 thereafter, for the basic support program. Common services range from translation of documents to mediating minor disputes or concerns, such as when and where to put out the garbage.

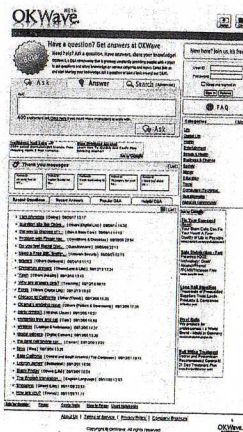
The company also helps foreign tenants with inquiries or problems regarding their landlords, real estate agencies or apartments, always working to maintain an unbiased, neutral position.

The-You contracts about 40 outside translators and interpreters working in 14 languages. Also, as problems can arise anytime, day or night, the firm is effectively on call 24 hours a day.

As of last fiscal year, the business had helped about 1,000 non-Japanese find homes.

The-You is just one example of social entrepreneurship, a recent phenomenon that has been growing in popularity, especially among younger people.

The Economy, Trade and Industry Ministry in a report last year defined a social entrepreneurship as a businesses whose mission is to



Courtesy of OKWave

A screen shot from OKWave's forum

work to solve societal problems through means of business or innovation, leading to the creation of new social values.

While their social orientations may be similar, their organizational structures can vary: They can be companies—stock or nonstock—nonprofit organizations (NPOs) or others.

The ministry report said that a survey conducted from November 2007 to January 2008 showed there were 8,000 such social entrepreneurs working in a market with an estimated value of ¥240 billion. The report said the number likely would increase 10-fold over the next three years as the entrepreneurs receive more recognition.

The change likely is supported by more conventional companies aiming to meet expectations regarding corporate social responsibility and the emergence of NPO banks that provide small and medium-sized businesses with low-interest loans.

The range of businesses and goods and services that social entrepreneurs provide is quite diverse. One group may be taking on the problems of child prostitution or poverty in Cambodia, while another works with Japan's growing population of NEETs (people not in employment, education or training). One group in particular is working toward sustainability in the nation's lumber and dairy industries.

OKWave is another example of a social entrepreneur striving to assist non-Japanese residents of Japan. The company's Web site offers a forum for foreigners to ask questions and receive answers on any topic about life in Japan.

The Web site's founder, Kaneto Kanemoto, established the company in 1999 based on a long string of tough life lessons, such as being bullied in school and having a hard time finding an apartment because of his South Korean passport. His goal, he says, was "to break down barriers that exist only because we don't know enough about each other."

By joining the OKWave community, you can post questions or answers about problems or other topics. As of October 2008, 1.25 million users had posted 16 million messages.

After the number of registered users on the Japanese site hit the half-million mark in March 2006, Kanemoto launched OKWorld, the same concept as the Japanese site, but in English, Chinese—both traditional and simplified—Korean and Japanese, for the convenience of foreign residents in Japan.

The types of questions vary. Recent postings on the English site included the difference between shampoo brands Asience and Essential and where a first-time visitor to Kyoto should go.

"We're aiming to connect people who want to know something with people who have something to teach," Kanemoto says. "People need to continue asking people things if we want to get to know them. I think these are the kinds of efforts that lead to a true state of peace."

In the red for its first three years, OKWave finally turned a profit in its fourth year after achieving name recognition. Other businesses, such as online shopping mall giant Rakuten, invested in the online forum as a prospective business model, which in turn attracted more advertisers to the site.

OKWave also runs an international Web site in Japanese, Chinese and English.

"John Lennon sings, 'Imagine all the people living life in peace...' and 'imagine all the people sharing all the world...' I want to help create that kind of world," Kanemoto says, adding that Portuguese, French and five other languages will be added to OKWave's international line up next year.

Internashokunal, too, hopes to eliminate barriers.

In 2005, founder Nobutaka Kikuchi was guiding a Saudi man around Osaka. The experience taught him that foreigners can have a tough time with food in Japan if they don't know the ingredients, which they could be allergic to or prohibited to eat by religious doctrine.

"I was shocked to find the same situation at the foreign language university I was attending. I thought I should start something to help non-Japanese speakers easily understand what is used in certain foods," he says.

He formed a group of volunteers later that year to try to persuade restaurateurs to indicate ingredients in English, but soon realized it would

INFORMATION

The-You

www.the-you.com
OKWave
world.okwave.jp
Internashokunal
www.i-nsl.org/index.html
Social Concierge
www.socialconcierge.org

be more effective to bypass language all together.

Kikuchi contracted a graphic designer to create pictographs of eight items that are restricted by religious law—such as pork or beef—and six allergens—such as dairy or buckwheat.

Just like The-You's Kawada, he decided to turn his social mission into a business, not a volunteer organization.

"I entered my social action project into a social entrepreneur competition and won. It was through that experience that I realized that running it as a business would be a more effective way to help people and get them to understand what we do," Kikuchi says.

"Some restaurants advertise that they use only organic vegetables or less salt, so we'll probably try to meet their needs, too."

The concept of social entrepreneurship can trace its origins to Britain. One person who made the notion popular is Mohammed Yunus, well known as the founder of Grameen Bank, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006 for improving the standing of living in Bangladesh

by offering small business loans to poor entrepreneurs—especially women.

Tamiko Hayashi, founder of public relations company Social Concierge, says the level of social business activities reflects a nation's maturity.

"An NPO and a company are on the same level when it comes to using business plans to find solutions for social ills," she says. "But it's also a fact they often have an influence on society, thanks to their unusual activities."

However, she adds, the gap is shrinking between mainstream companies with socially-oriented programs and NPOs seeking to increase their incomes to cover operating costs.

Hayashi—an NPO organizer who offers guidance to those trying to fight societal problems at home and abroad—says the recent rise in such businesses in Japan reflects the trend among the younger generations to try to make a career out of what they really want to do. She attributes the change to a reaction to the dissatisfaction their parents seem to have experienced after their long, hard work through the Bubble economy of the 1980s.

"But it is key to their success that they effectively and openly use their profits to meet the goals of their mission. Otherwise, they will not gain the public's trust and will face problems on the business end of things," Hayashi says.

"That said, their activities are a good way to open up society's eyes to a variety of problems and to nurture a new way of thinking about contributing to society."



Courtesy of Internashokunal

Pictographs quickly identify ingredients diners may wish to avoid for religious or health reasons.