

Impressions through the Wajima Collaboration Project

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The beginning of the project

I supported to manage this project in terms of mainly marketing, especially with visualizing the overall project. First, I heard from Mr. Kirimoto of his concern that he could not accurately convey with mere words the merits of *Wajima nuri* to customers. He wanted to precisely tell customers of the merits of *Wajima nuri* and to find words which would arouse the customer's interest. He believed that if a method such as kansei engineering were used, such words could be found. Professor Nakamori has assumed the responsibility for Kansei-engineering, so I started from sharing information with students to get them understand the *Wajima nuri* industry's condition and what Mr. Kirimoto needs. Based on this perception, we clarified the purpose of the project.

Overall design of the project

The former *Wajima nuri* business model had been to expand its sales to the entire country by a sales method called "Wan-ko" or "Tanomoshi-ko," where the purchase of *Wajima nuri* is paid for with pooled resources. Wealthy individual consumers and high-class restaurants are major customers. There had been need for On Haré as well as Ké days (such as celebratory and funeral occasions), there is need for luxury tableware to entertain guest at home and restaurants - a purpose well-served by *Wajima nuri* - a particularly high quality lacquerware. However, data shows that the production of lacquerware had already reached its peak at the bubble economy

years and has now fallen to 30% of its highest levels.^[A1] When the production had peaked, many people bought makié (lacquer sprinkled with gold or silver powder as a decoration) products at 10 million yen or more. Customers seemed owning expensive items like *Wajima nuri*, and such classy crafted items held special meaning and gave the owner a sense of vanity from ownership. However, the economic structure and lifestyle of Japan have changed, and people's desires are met through several high-end things aside from *Wajima nuri*. In addition, we must also consider that the values concerning ownership will also change. Owning high class products is no longer value for some people now. Based on these facts, we thought that we need to find new, yet unmet needs that are completely different from what *Wajima nuri* had been targeting. And it has been thought necessary to clarify what kind of potential customers' needs *Wajima nuri* can meet, and the exact message it needs to convey to prospective customers. Therefore, in addition to the project purpose of finding words to communicate with customers through kansei engineering, we decided to create a new business model.

According to Igor Ansoff's theory of strategic management, a company's growth strategy is divided into the following categories:

1. Promote existing products more widely in existing markets (market penetration)
2. Introduce new products to existing markets (new product development)
3. Find new markets to sell existing products (new market development)

4. Introduce new products into the new market (diversification)

Promoting *Wajima nuri* at the shop by using words to convey the merits of *Wajima nuri* is the (1) market penetration strategy since here we are engaging in sales promotion to customers who already have previous purchase experience or are interested in the product since they have come to the store for it. However, as Kirimoto sought to expand the shrinking market of the *Wajima nuri* industry, we need to consider not only strategy (1) but also strategies (2), (3), and (4). As for strategy 2, that is, new product development, Kirimoto has been working with various external designers to come up with various newly designed products. Although it has met with some success, it seems that the freshness of the design does not offer a real long-term solution. So, as we mentioned at the beginning we have asked for “words to convey the merit of *Wajima nuri*,” but for the *Wajima nuri* industry to grow, we have to target new customers different from the ones we have targeted so far. In other words, what we should consider in this project is (3) new market development strategies to find new customers who are interested in and who will purchase existing products. Currently, the main *Wajima nuri* customers are middle aged to senior women, who are interested both in fine tableware as well as in traditional crafts. Although there are a certain number of these people, it cannot be expected that the number will increase significantly. Therefore, we have to find people who, although they have never used *Wajima nuri*, and have never been interested in it, have a potential desire in some area of their life that has not been satisfied and *Wajima nuri*'s value actually matches that desire.

Immediately after the start of the project, we made a comprehensive visualization of the various values people associate with *Wajima nuri*. Next, from there, we picked a few characteristic values (make us feel luxurious, traditional culture, feel nature, enjoy food, health, and so on) and then created a virtual customer base that may want

that value. Here, the students found the following kinds of people interesting - elderly people who felt it hard to lift heavy tableware, enthusiastic educational mothers, and businessmen with a high income (although men have not been targeted much until now). Overseas customers obviously figured in target candidates, and Japan has international students as well. But we wanted to target Japanese customers and decided to think about customers in Japan first. Then, assuming these targets as a potential customer layer, we asked the students to actually examine what they know about *Wajima nuri*, their lifestyle and the values that they cherish. The students traced and contacted people who came under these target groups, and conducted interviews and questionnaire surveys. As a result, although it was possible to conduct investigations related to *Wajima nuri*, such as its image and the experience of using *Wajima nuri*, we became keenly aware that unfortunately we could not get to know the target's daily life deeply and ferret out hidden desires.

The students seemed confused about the project, which progressed from the business point of view and away from their academic specialty; however, this originated from the viewpoint that it is necessary to deeply understand an object, which I think is essentially the same as archeology and anthropology. It is probably necessary to approach real society from the business perspective, as a project of cultural resource management. I would be pleased if students could use something they experienced in this project for the cultural resource management they will be undertaking in the future.

What was obtained from the project?

In proceeding with this project, I heard several impressive stories. For example, a high school girl had a story that she came to buy *Wajima nuri* for health for her grandmother, who was sick and had no appetite. She was able to enjoy meals again thanks to light and easy-to-hold *Wajima nuri*; she said that she thanked her afterward and that she appeared to become healthy again. Other stories

were of the child who liked the *Wajima nuri* spoon so much he would not give it up and another child who liked *Wajima nuri* so much that he pestered his parents to buy it. When Teacher Matsumura and the students interviewed a craftsman, they heard an impressive tale such as “*Wajima nuri* first becomes an acquaintance, then a friend, and eventually becomes family. And finally, it becomes part of oneself.” These stories are assets ? the means by which to convey the charm of *Wajima nuri*. When I said to Mr. Kirimoto’s wife Junko-san that such narrative stories could be assets for *Wajima nuri*, she said “Oh! I’ve never thought such stories have values.” in surprise. For people of Wajima, these may be ordinary stories, but not for other people. They are too priceless to be simply buried. I would strongly recommend to those involved in *Wajima nuri* to gather and disseminate such stories.

While listening to the stories of many people, I also found that the keywords were flavorful and had a unique feel. But these keywords cannot be experienced without actually using them. At the same time, it became clear again that the notion that lacquerware was hard to care for was a very high hurdle in the way of its widespread use. I did not have experience of using lacquerware on a daily basis, but as I became involved in this project, I actually started using it and realized that it was not as troublesome as I had imagined. For these reasons, it is probably important to provide an experience of first use. For example, there are various ways to lower purchasing barriers, such as offering an experience tour that lets people lease at about 5-600 yen a month, so they can experience to eat food from *Wajima nuri* and to clean up afterwards. They should know it is not so difficult to use *Wajima nuri*. Though they may be far from the existing selling methods, I would like to propose expanding the existing selling methods to include those incorporating some “user experience.”

Conclusion

Each time we met, Mr. Kirimoto said that he

wanted to revitalize not only his own store, but also the entire *Wajima nuri* industry. On hearing his story, I found that there is an industry-segmentation, such that one manufacturer cannot produce the complete range of *Wajima nuri* products and that the industry divides labor roles among craftsmen. I proceeded on the lines of Mr. Kirimoto’s thought, thinking that it would be possible to propose something to the *Wajima nuri* industry. One of the things that the project can propose to the industry, as a whole, is that there are several potential customers (for example, a new generation of young people living in urban areas, health conscious high society seniors who love home-parties, parents, single ladies who live at home, tired office workers, gourmets, artists, and so on). *Wajima* lacquer manufacturers may be able to expand the entire industry market, while targeting different markets tailored to their corporate philosophy and future direction. In doing so, as students suggest, catchphrases suitable for each customer group and the appropriate communication means are also important.

It would be effective if the *Wajima nuri* stories were gathered and disseminated throughout the *Wajima nuri* industry. It is thought that efforts to maximize user experience for the industry as a whole will be effective in expanding individual seller markets.

Only when the industry as a whole is revitalized, will cultural resources, such as *Wajima nuri*, be protected and promoted. I hope that this project will lead to something positive in that direction.

[A1] Please check if this conveys your intended meaning.

However, if you do not intend to refer to the Japanese economy and are simply referring to the production of *Wajima nuri*, consider replacing this with, “However, data shows that the production of lacquerware had already reached its peak earlier and has now fallen to 30% of its highest levels.”