

Why Are Nonprofit Organizations Financially Strained in Japan? An Analysis of Japanese NPO Management and Marketing Strategies

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ABSTRACT: The number of nonprofit organizations (NPOs) has been growing worldwide in the last few decades. In Japan, the number of NPOs started skyrocketing in the late 1990s and now has reached almost 50,000, a significant increase from fewer than 10,000 in the early 2000s. Despite their increasing importance, the majority of NPOs are financially strained in Japan. To address this issue, this study analyzes data collected from interviews with management-level officials from 50 nonprofit organizations about their activities, management, and marketing in Nagoya, Japan.

Keywords: Nonprofit marketing; nonprofit management; nonprofit strategy

JEL Classifications: M; Y

1. Introduction

The number of nonprofit organizations (NPOs) has been growing worldwide in the last few decades (Ebrahim, 2003; Khare, 2011; Macedo & Pinho, 2006; Stride & Lee, 2007). In Japan, the number of NPOs started skyrocketing in the late 1990s. According to the Cabinet Office (2012), the number of Japanese NPOs in September 2014 was approximately 49,100, a significant increase from 8,315 in November 2002 (Ishizuka, 2002). Ogawa (2009) argues that the government recognized the contributions of volunteers during the Hanshin Great Earthquake that occurred in the Kansai area in 1995. This fed into the enactment of the NPO law in 1998, which aims to promote NPO activities by giving them the legal status (Cabinet Office, 2012).

Despite their increasing importance, the majority of NPOs are financially strained in Japan (Cabinet Office, 2012). There also exist few studies on how Japanese NPOs are managed (Miyake, 2003; Schwartz, 2003; Uo, 2012 and 2013). With regard to this gap, this study analyzes data collected from interviews with 80 individuals from 50 nonprofit organizations about their activities, management, and marketing in Nagoya, Japan. This study focuses on: 1) marketing channels in both financial and human resources, 2) fundraising channels for organizational management, 3) issues that organizations face and how they are addressed, 4) marketing strategies for the future, and 5) opinions about the term “marketing.”

2. Literature Review

Many NPOs have recently adopted marketing strategies for financial and human resources as competition for funding has become fierce (Blery et al., 2010; Brady et al., 2011; Khare, 2011; Pope et al., 2009; Stride & Lee, 2007; Drucker, 2006; Uo, 2013). While there have been quite a few studies on NPO management and marketing internationally (Andreasen & Kotler, 2007; Dolnicar & Lazarevski, 2009; Padanyi & Gainer, 2004; Sargeant, 2009; Stebbins & Hartman, 2013; Weger, 2011), there exist few pieces of literature about Japanese NPO marketing (Miyake, 2003; Uo, 2013).

According to the existing literature, the majority of Japanese NPOs are recognized as volunteer groups rather than professional organizations (Ogawa, 2009). Indeed, they often do not possess management expertise (Miyake, 2003). Uo (2012) explains that many Japanese NPOs remain far from

what is desired in terms of communicating their presence and activities to wider society and thus the value of their activities has not sufficiently been transmitted or understood by the public.

Some scholars argue that Japanese society is not ready for NPOs to function smoothly. For instance, Ichimura (2008) states that Japanese society and culture have not been mature enough to support NPOs. Uo (2012) points out the issues of low tax exemption benefits from donations to NPOs. He notes citizens' poor recognition of NPOs' contributions to society. He also explains that Japanese in general think that public services should be offered by the government and do not have cultural beliefs in helping strangers. He continues to argue that Japanese are willing to pay for something directly beneficial to them (or obligatory to them) such as community fees, taxes, or coin donations on the street or in shrines; however, they do not have habits to make periodical contributions to social organizations such as NPOs because they feel that they already make contributions through the payment of taxes. Indeed, compared to the United States or the United Kingdom, in Japan, companies make more contributions as corporate social responsibility (CSR) to NPOs than individuals do (Table 1).

Table 1. Proportions of Donations to NPOs in Japan, US, and UK (billion)

	Donations from individuals	Donations from companies
Japan	42.7% or 518.2 YEN	57.3% or 695.7YEN
US	94.3% or 242.2 USD	5.7% or 14.55USD
UK	96.3% or 12.9 GBP	3.7% or 0.5 GBP

Source: Okuyama (2013)

Miyake (2003) explains that NPO marketing is mission-oriented, starting from thinking of benefits to beneficiaries. In order to strengthen marketing activities, NPOs have to make their contributions to society clearly understood by beneficiaries, donors, and other stakeholders. However, mainly due to financial constraints, many Japanese NPOs find it difficult to invest in marketing. According to Ichimura (2008), 73% of Japanese NPOs have an annual income of less than five million yen (approximately 50,000 USD). Only 20% of NPO staff members are paid and 60% of the paid staff are part-time employees. Among paid staff, nearly 40% earn less than one million yen (approximately 10,000 USD) and only 13.6% of them earn more than three million yen (approximately 30,000 USD) a year. Shwartz (2003) states that Japanese NPOs lack competent human resources with a stable salary and expertise in marketing who are essential for organizational development.

Apart from scarce financial and human resources, the issue of the government taking advantage of NPOs for economical outsourcing to reduce public costs is raised (Ichimura, 2008; Mizushima, 2013; Ogawa, 2009; Schwarz, 2003). Ichimura (2008) and Schwarz (2003), for example, state that the majority of Japanese NPOs largely dependent on governmental funding and few NPOs run only with income generated from their own activities. Therefore, the government uses many NPOs through outsourcing. Mizushima (2013) describes that as a result of losing its independence from the government, many NPOs participate in activities different from their missions in order to receive funding from the government for survival.

Ogawa (2009) argues that many Japanese NPOs are "quasi-governmental organizations" or de facto state agencies controlled by the government, which has promoted cost-effective neoliberalism. Indeed, he avers, the fact that they depend on governmental funding points to the indirect government control of them. This is not a function of civil society based on voluntary wills and civic activities (Sargeant, 2009).

3. Methodology

This paper examines Japanese NPO marketing through semi-structured interviews with management-level officials from Japanese NPOs. For the selections of NPOs to be researched, the 2012 NPO Guide Book published by Boramimi (2012), a Network NPO that supports other NPOs, was used for the selection of participating NPOs.

We first emailed to 60 NPOs in Nagoya, Japan, asking them for interviews about their management and marketing. Approximately 80% replied affirmatively. In the end, we were able to interview 80 management-level officials from 50 different NPOs. These interviews took place from

January to October 2014. This is an exploratory study and does not intend to test certain hypotheses or generalize findings. This study continues to deepen and widen the current research to be further developed.

This paper particularly focuses on the following items:

- 1) Marketing channels in both financial and human resources
- 2) Fundraising channels for organizational management
- 3) Issues that organizations face and how they are addressed
- 4) Marketing strategies for the future
- 5) Opinions about the term “marketing”

The items 1 through 4 were extracted from Pope et al.’s (2009) and NUCB Global Nonprofit Management Team’s (2013) survey questionnaire studies on NPO marketing.

Marketing channels are essential in successful fundraising and staff recruitment. In the United States, for example, Weger (2011) mentions that paper-based materials such as newsletters and leaflets have long disappeared from NPO marketing and the current mainstream channels are the Social Networking Sites (SNS) such as Facebook and Twitter. Indeed, 89% of US NPOs use Facebook and 57% use Twitter for marketing (Weger, 2011).

It is also important to understand what kinds of issues Japanese NPOs face and how they attempt to address them. As Pope et al. (2009) and Weger (2011) affirm, scarce financial and human resources are universal issues for NPOs, but this study intends to analyze other issues specific to Japanese NPOs as well.

Regarding the term marketing, according to the literature review, many NPOs are biased against marketing. For instance, in NUCB Global Nonprofit Management Team’s (2013) study, the vice president from a French NPO reported that “marketing in our organization is not really formalized. In general, speaking of ‘marketing’ in a little association like ours is not common because it’s a vocabulary that is connoted with ‘business.’ We don’t have customers because we don’t sell any product and we don’t organize big campaigns of communication” (p. 10). A participant from another French NPO said that the organization has the same marketing structure as for-profit organizations but he prefers to call marketing plans “action plans” because he considers marketing a business term. Another study conducted by Pilot (2014) also suggests that the term marketing is associated very much with business. For example, the director of an NPO fighting against economic crimes affecting developing countries claimed that “I’m a little uncomfortable about this marketing term for NPOs in particular for small organizations like ours unable to raise funds as large organizations do” (p. 7). If NPOs do not favor the term marketing, what other term or terms do they use and how do they do it? It is therefore considered crucial to ask interviewees about the term and relevant issues.

Semi-structured interviews are employed for this study because they play an important role in the development of exploratory research models and the preparation for more systematic forms of investigation (Shensul et al., 1999). In organizing and presenting data analysis, given the characteristics of this study, it is important to emphasize that the main purpose of this interview data is “to identify key issues, regardless of unanimity, convergence or frequency” (Cohen et al., 2011). We thus adopt a selective focus on remarks that we consider critical to describe key issues serving for future studies.

4. Results

During interviews, we have received various types of responses about marketing channels, fundraising channels, marketing issues that NPOs face, marketing strategies, and the term “marketing.” This section explains these responses in each item.

Marketing channels

Regarding the types of marketing channels, the home page ranks first with 30 organizations, followed by paper-based advertising (e.g., leaflets, news letters, free papers) with 23, SNS (e.g., Facebook 15, Twitter 5, Mixi 1) with 21 and the mass media (e.g., newspapers 15, TV 6) with 21. Also events such as seminars or lectures and word of mouth (WOM) are popular with 16 and 15 respectively.

Almost every NPO has HPs, and half of them reported that they use them for marketing purposes. As to SNS, Facebook is the most popular with 13 organizations followed by Twitter with 5. Mixi, a Japanese SNS and blogging site that used to be popular, is rarely used for marketing.

While the US NPOs no longer use the paper-based materials for marketing, as mentioned in the literature review, the majority of Japanese NPOs still rely on them. Also one-third of the researched NPOs use events or WOM for marketing. This may indicate the significance of face-to-face communication in Japanese NPO marketing.

Fundraising channels

The majority of the researched NPOs (37/41) rely on funding from the government. For instance, a community development NPO entirely depends on the funding from Nagoya City. Yet, depending highly on public funding may be problematic. The following are comments from officials of NPOs receiving funding from the government:

“Administration costs are high to receive and manage funding from the local government. As a result, we pay less attention to our social activities” (Environmental Protection NPO)

“The governmental funding does not include administration costs. We have to spend a lot of energy and money to go to the national tax agency, for example. The government should understand the running costs of NPOs” (Career Development NPO)

More than three-quarters of the researched NPOs collect membership fees to cover running costs. According to Ogawa (2009), since the enactment of the NPO law in 1998, the number of NPOs that charge their members (including staff members) fees has drastically increased as encouraged by the government in order to enable them to be responsible for their volunteer activities. As to other incomes, 21 NPOs earn incomes from activities such as seminars, consulting, and advertisements, but only a few are able to run the organizations with those incomes alone. Also, 11 NPOs received donations from individuals and eight NPOs received donations from or are financially sponsored by companies. Further, three of those who receive support from companies receive it from their own parent companies: that is, companies own these NPOs. As an official from an Environmental Protection NPO said, “The running costs are all covered by our parent company. Our NPO alone cannot generate enough income to sustain themselves.” Some respondents said that their NPOs are run by their pocket money (e.g. a pension).

Issues that NPOs face

Similar to issues discussed in the literature review, 13 organizations mentioned a lack of funding and nine mentioned a lack of staff members. Scarce financial and human resources go hand in hand (NUCB Global Nonprofit Management Team, 2013) as some informants described:

“As long as our organization is a cooperation, we need enough funding to be able to hire paid staff. Volunteer-based organizations often lack manpower and ideas” (Community Development NPO)

“We have not been able to gather members due to a lack of manpower” (Environmental Protection NPO)

In relation to funding, four respondents mentioned the aftereffects of the Great East Japan Earthquake such as the decrease of public funding and/or donations.

“The Ministry of Environment cut funding for us due to the Great East Japan Earthquake” (Environmental Protection NPO)

“Many members stopped paying membership fees when the Great East Japan Earthquake occurred” (International Cooperation NPO)

The negative effects of the Great East Japan Earthquake cannot be ignored when considering fundraising. However, in some cases, the consequences of the earthquake helped support NPOs' fundraising. As a respondent from an International Cooperation NPO mentioned, “Since the Great East Japan Earthquake, the donation has increased. Many of the new donors were the affected from the earthquake. They received support from overseas at that time, so they seem to pay it back now” (International Cooperation NPO). Another said, “It is easier to receive support when we mention that we fundraise for the Great East Japan Earthquake” (Network NPO). Thus, the earthquake has helped some NPOs receive donations.

Along with a lack of human resources, nine NPOs mention “aging of staff members” as one of the issues that they face. “The number of new members has recently decreased and thus the members have been aging. We would like younger generations to join us. Yet, we do not know how to do it” (Environmental Protection NPO). “Younger generations before retirement need certain income to make a living. There are staff members who are in their forties but earn less than 150,000 yen (1,500 USD) a month” (Environmental Protection NPO).

Three NPOs mentioned that donation culture remains immature in Japan, which agrees with the literature review.

“In Japan, there exists no donation culture, and thus few donate. It is even more so in Nagoya compared to Tokyo or Osaka because they [people in Nagoya] are less familiar with NPOs” (Medical Care NPO)

“We do not rely on donations. We don’t think we can receive donations anyway. We do not have a Christian-like donation culture in Japan” (International Cooperation NPO)

“In Japan, we pay for our own benefits, not for the society’s as a whole” (Community Development NPO)

“I do not deny donation culture. However, I have an image that the rich give to the poor, and it does not sound equal. I even have a prejudice against fundraising” (Community Development NPO).

During this study, some respondents pointed out Japanese citizens’ lack of NPO literacy. “[Japanese] Citizens think that NPOs are groups of volunteers free of charge for service. That idea was conceptualized by the NPO law. A few years ago, for example, our activities were published by a newspaper. We then received phone calls from a group of people that they would like us to come to hold seminars, saying ‘It [holding seminars for them] is free, isn’t it because your organization is nonprofit?’ The citizens have to understand what NPOs are” (Lifelong Learning NPO). Another respondent also told me, “NPOs are thought of as organizations that solely work in emergency situations” (Environmental Protection NPO).

Also, as in the literature review, one respondent showed his concern that the government uses NPOs as cheap outsourcing tools for reducing costs. “I feel that the government takes advantage of NPOs” (Lifelong Learning NPO).

While many interviewees lament their scarce financial situations, some interviewees told me that they do not work for earning money.

“We are a volunteer-oriented NPO and not interested in making money” (Environmental Protection NPO)

“Most NPOs are more concerned about making money than helping people. What then are NPOs for?” (Career Development NPO)

“Making ends meet is important, but what is ideal is doing an NPO as a past time” (Community Development NPO)

Regarding staff recruitment or seeking beneficiaries, “We do not want to extend our network without limits because we would like to deal with only reliable people” (Community Development NPO). “We do not have much desire to promote our activities. We would like to target a few rather than all” (Career Development NPO). “Even if we had a lot of money, we would not invest in PR. We just want to work with those who understand our mission” (Career Development NPO).

At the same time, some interviewees mentioned how important fundraising is. “There are volunteer-oriented NPOs that do not pursue funding; however, their activities are limited and unlikely to be further developed. I wonder if those volunteer-oriented NPOs can really solve social problems. Even NPOs need business approaches to manage themselves” (Environmental Protection NPO).

Marketing strategies for the future

With regard to fundraising strategies toward the future, desire to increase membership and/or activities, and sponsorships from the government and/or companies were mentioned. Nonetheless, few proposed any concrete plans. In order to acquire financial and human resources, investment that involves risk is required. During an interview, some interviewees told me that they would like to accept university students as volunteers; however, they are concerned that if students volunteered for course credits, they would just come one day and never come back again (thus they do not serve as a valuable human resource) (Environmental Protection NPO). Strategies toward the future can also refer to how the issues discussed in the previous section will be addressed. Nevertheless, as most issues are related to scarce financial and human resources, it is difficult to find concrete solutions.

The term “Marketing”

As the literature review indicated, marketing biases were observed:

“Marketing is a business term and is not used in NPOs” (Environmental Protection NPO)

“Marketing is a term that came from American capitalism. The “greedy” image of trapping and cheating the innocent is not compatible with NPOs. The term ‘needs’ may suit NPOs” (Community Development NPO)

This study indicates that many NPOs considered addressing the issues of fundraising and staff recruitment important; however, many interviewees have negative opinions about marketing, which may play a crucial role in addressing these issues. If the term marketing is not suitable in the contexts of Japanese NPOs, what other terms could be useful? The term “need” was suggested by one interviewee, but it may not fully describe what marketing means. This issue remains to be addressed in future studies.

5. Discussion and Suggestions

This section analyzes the findings from interviews with management-level officials. While discussing concrete strategies toward fundraising and staff recruitment is out of the scope in this exploratory study, the majority of Japanese NPOs use SNS, notably Facebook, albeit are unable to take a full advantage of it effectively due to scarce human resources. It is likely that SNS will play a critical role in the future of NPO marketing including fundraising in Japan. Citing an example of UK, Waddingham (2013) suggests that NPOs post the content of their activities about how they contribute to the society on SNS (e.g., Facebook in his example) instead of merely setting up a donation section. He argues that compared to a Facebook page with a simple link to a donation system, one with actual contents about the NPO’s activities raised five times more funds on average. Also, posting videos about NPO activities is effective: in Waddingham’s study, the Facebook page with videos about activities raised on average eighteen times more funds than the one with a simple link to the donation system.

The use of SNS itself is free and has potential for NPO marketing. However, NPOs need staff members that can spare time to maintain and update SNS. Those staff members also need expertise to write or create content. Many Japanese NPOs use volunteers for the maintenance/updates of SNS, but it is doubtful how much time they can spare or to what extent they are capable of doing this task. International NPOs such as UNICEF and Save the Children hire PR and/or fundraising specialists in an attempt to increase funding. Due to scarce financial and human resources and marketing biases, however, many Japanese NPOs have not made efforts in marketing and/or fundraising. Recently, however, the Japan Fundraising Association, an organization dedicated to encourage and systemize fundraising, was established in 2009. Tentosen, a pro-bono organization that supports NPOs mainly through using SNS for PR and marketing, was also established in 2010. Japanese NPOs have gradually been changing.

While most of the NPOs in this study are financially strained, a handful of NPOs are abundant in resources. One Health Care NPO that helps the severely disabled, for example, has grown by 100% annually since its inception. Staff members earn an annual income of 4,000,000-6,000,000 yen (approximately 40,000-60,000 USD), which is quite high by Japanese NPO standards.

The founder of this organization reported that every single nonprofit organization could make profits. “I am confident that any organization will be able to make ends meet or profits as long as they have three or more beneficiaries and focus on reducing costs and increasing revenues, which surprisingly few organizations do. We have the know-how and are ready to provide it to anyone asking for it.” The following are some tips that he provided.

Focus

“We focus on the severely disabled because, despite high demands, very few organizations provide them with service in Japan.”

Vision

“We set mid-term and long-term goals in the action plan and carry them out. Many NPOs don’t do that.”

Service

“If we satisfy beneficiaries, we don’t need unique advertising or PR techniques; beneficiaries will come through WOM because the quality of service is high.”

SNS

“We have a Facebook account with a blog that explains our activities. Facebook is a useful tool for staff recruitment as well. Recently, young people use Facebook and contact us to work as staff for relatively high salaries.”

Networking

“We have connections with one-third of the special-needs schools in Japan, which have formed communities among themselves.”

Marketing

For him, the term marketing is “a synthesis of every commercial activity, including management. Those who ignore marketing and management do not understand that NPOs are corporations.”

The case of this NPO shows that non-profit organizations can generate operating funds and exist with quite high budgets to provide living wages to attract and maintain qualified employees, to achieve their mission, vision, and goals, and to become more visible to the general public which likely ensures their continued success.

Suggestions for future studies

This study analyzed Japanese NPO marketing; that is how NPOs reach out to citizens including beneficiaries, donors, and others. During the interviews, many respondents showed concern about Japanese citizens’ lack of understanding of NPOs. A respondent from a Health Care NPO also mentioned that people in Nagoya lack a donation culture. It may thus be important to work toward developing a donation culture through marketing strategies. It is also recommended that future research be conducted on citizens’ NPO literacy: what they know about NPOs and their activities in and a comparative analysis of citizens’ NPO literacy levels among Tokyo, Osaka, Nagoya, and other locations.

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