



How an iconic cartoon character revolutionized Japanese beer consumption

By Mayumi Watanabe

This is a story of how new ways of marketing made magic in Japan. Once upon a time, there lived a penguin in Japan who pushed aluminum consumption for beer cans. His name was Papipu. He has a website, <http://www.papipu.jp/>.

He spent time with the Japanese beer industry from 1983 to 1988, and worked for a filmmaker, a local electric utility and other industries.

Papipu is a fictional cartoon penguin character created by illustrators Norio Hikone and Seiji Toda. They are best known for TV commercials of canned beer with their pictures, made by Suntory, one of Japan's leading brewer and whisky distiller.

Japan imported its first beer in 1613 and commercialized the first domestic beer in 1869, and aluminum canned beer a hundred or so years later in the early 1970's, according to Kirin Brewery. Kirin estimates that in 1989, canned beer had a 29% market share in Japan. The aluminum can share has

since grown considerably and in 2017, it was 48%, according to the Brewers Association of Japan.

The 1980s was an exciting time as Western mass consumer culture was setting into Japanese lifestyles and aluminum canned beer too. It was the time of the so-called "packaging war" for the breweries. In search of new frontiers, breweries were reaching out to women drinkers. Beer containers became a testing ground for creative ideas, coming in various sizes, shapes and colors.

Suntory marketed its first beer-in-plastic bottle, shaped like barrels, in 1982. In 1983, Papipu penguin TV commercial set the scene. In a chic bar, a handsome penguin is quietly drinking a can



The Suntory penguin beer itself was short lived, and did not even last more than five years, but its marketing story is retold many times over in the industry.

of beer. His eyes are focused on a female penguin singer, singing a ballade, and slowly tears fill his eyes. One hears a man saying, "This beer makes you cry, doesn't it? Suntory Canned Beer."

The voice of the singing penguin was that of Seiko Matsuda, the queen of J-Pop, singing an English song, *Sweet Memories*. But Matsuda was nowhere to be seen. There was no hint it might be her, given the song's lyrics were entirely in English.

The Papipu penguin grabbed the public's eyes. And people loved the song too and started to ask, who the singer was.

Months after the commercial's release, the Japanese public was stunned to learn, the English voice was Matsuda's. At the time, she was not known for singing in foreign languages.

Matsuda fans say this is exactly how Matsuda had started her career. Wikipedia reports that Matsuda's first job was in a cosmetics commercial. But, rather than smiling in front of the camera, she was singing offscreen. But it did not matter, because her voice alone propelled her to stardom.

"Penguin changed Suntory's history. Beer was not a large part of Suntory's business back then, in fact, we [canmakers] were thinking they could possibly engage with this market less. Then they became keen on beer," said a second canmaker official.

Matsuda sang *Sweet Memories* again for Suntory 22 years later for its steel canned coffee commercial. This time, Matsuda appeared in front of the camera and sang the song in Japanese.

The Suntory penguin beer itself was short lived, and did not even last more than five years, but its marketing story is retold many times over in the industry.

“At the time, Japan had only one type of beer—draft beer,” said the second canmaker official.

That was before 1987, before Asahi Breweries’ release of Asahi Dry, crispy beer with lower malt and higher alcoholic content. Asahi changed the way people bought beer.

Before Asahi Dry, people went to bars and said, “Beer.”

After Asahi Beer, people needed to specify, “Nama (draft), or dry.”

Asahi’s competitors became fully engaged with “dry beer” too, leading to marketing competition dubbed as the “Dry War.”

In 2000, low-malt cheaper beer, called “Category 3” came into the market and the competition was about how cheap beer could be.

Said the first canmaker official: “Beer wars all these years were about beer. And now we have come to the end of this cycle and the focus will shift to cans. In the last few decades, cans have become a little thinner and shapes more standardized, but that is about it. The canmaking industry consists of almost the same companies, the same people. We have to start thinking about making cans lighter and thinner. Canmakers and can sheet makers need to work together to achieve technology breakthroughs.”

In 2017, aluminum beer can demand was 9.8 billion cans, or around 430,000 mt of aluminum, down 2% from 2016. And in 2018, it is forecast to fall by another 2%, according to the Japan Aluminum Can Recycling Association and the Japan Aluminum Association.

But Japanese beer drinkers say they are loyal to aluminum because the beer from such cans

tastes better than beer from steel, paper or PET (polyethylene terephthalate) containers.

And aluminum does not just satisfy the pallets of Japanese beer drinkers, Jim Beam, the world’s biggest-selling US bourbon whiskey, is sold mostly in cans in Japan.

While US beer production continues to grow amid the popularity of craft beer, Japan’s beer market is actually shrinking.

Japan’s domestic beer production fell 1.9% in 2016 and a further 2.9% in 2017, and its per capita consumption was a lowly 54th globally in 2016, the latest data showed.

Its aluminum beverage can market is also shrinking overall. Demand was 10.3 billion cans in 2012, but had fallen 7% to 9.57 billion cans by 2017. A further 2% decline is forecast for 2018, to 9.38 billion cans, according to the Japan Aluminum Can Recycling Association.

But in the non-beer alcoholic drink segment, there is a glimmer of hope: Consumption from aluminum cans surged 12% in 2016 and a further 10% in 2017 to 3.54 billion cans.

For the moment, the decrease in demand from beer makers is being covered by the increase from whiskey.

And the Japanese aluminum industry will undoubtedly not cede ground in the beverage market without a fight—beverages account for 20% of rolled and extruded aluminum consumption in Japan, which is more than the automotive sector. ■

Beverages
account for
20%
of rolled and
extruded aluminum
consumption in
Japan, which is
more than the
automotive sector.