

Shinkansen Onboard Sales

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Nippon Restaurant Enterprise Co., Ltd. is a subsidiary of East Japan Railway Company (JR East), and we have been developing business sectors, such as food and drink services, since the days of Japanese National Railways (JNR) in order to make railway journeys as enjoyable as possible. My work is in onboard sales, an essential part of railway journeys in Japan.

Cabin attendants serving customers on shinkansen, limited expresses, and sleeper trains sell typical train meals called *ekiben* (boxed lunches often with a particular style for each line or station) as well as local souvenirs and regional foods from trackside areas, and railway memorabilia that are popular with rail enthusiasts and children.

Although onboard sales do come under the marketing industry, the service element in this work is also important because with today's ever-diversifying service needs, it deals with how to please the customer, how to lead on to the next stage and how to orchestrate a railway trip with an operator in the JR group of companies.

I would like to explain the work flow of onboard sales, and deal with topics such as connecting with the customer, which is the true joy of this work.

Diverse Functions and Destinations

First, most of us working in onboard sales are not regular, full-time employees but are temporary or part-time workers. That's what I am too.

I work for the Tokyo Trains Sales Branch in Tokyo Station; our office usually employs as many as 140 people, some of them students or housewives, working the days and times that suit them. We mainly sell items onboard shinkansen and some limited expresses. We are responsible for five shinkansen routes: the Tohoku Shinkansen which operates as far as Shin-Aomori; the Joetsu Shinkansen to Niigata, and what could be called the more 'local' Nagano, Akita and Yamagata shinkansen. Our daily schedules are based on a round trip on each of these lines so we board the shinkansen at Tokyo Station, go to the other terminus and then return. Naturally, the working hours vary according to the destination and the sales method depends on the particular class of rolling stock used on the line.

Of course, the products vary with the route and season too, but the types of customer also vary with the route, day and time, so the products and services must meet their needs.

Between 80 and 90 kinds of products are sold on each line. Although the sales wagons are small, they are laden with several pieces of each item so they sometimes weigh more than 100 kg. Mine is particularly heavy and weighs more than 120 kg fully loaded.

Preparing 'Store Front'

The first thing I do when I get to work is to change into my uniform and then check the details of the shinkansen I will actually be serving.

There are many different things to check, including the schedule (train type and number), data on sales of reserved seats (the MARS information), number of boxed lunches and souvenirs loaded at each station, various other important points, and sales figures for the previous day. Each crew member always checks these things every morning.

Once the check has been completed, I make my departure roll call where I confirm the departure times and reservations, and do a final check for when we leave.

Once this roll call is finished I start preparing my sales wagon, which means attractively displaying between 80 and 90 items. The best-selling products vary according to the time of day. Because customers' needs vary not only with time but also with day, season, and line, I adjust the daily display with different numbers of products.

The *ekinaka* marketing plan (see *JRTR* 56) now used by locating many stores inside the ticket wickets of larger stations draws customers' attention to a diversity of products using various clever sales angles and we must operate within this sales environment too. To compete with stations, in addition to having an attractive product line-up, it is important to arrange products carefully and attractively to whet the passengers' interest so they reach for products as we walk by.

I spend as much time as I can on this. Even before meeting the passengers onboard, I prepare by consciously observing people heading to the shinkansen that morning, on the lookout for hints that will give me some idea about

the needs of that day's customers. If it is especially hot, I might display more cooling drinks more prominently; I draw on my daily experience, and think about the coming day's customers when I display the products.

Making Customers Feel Comfortable

The first thing I do onboard the shinkansen is to greet the passengers.

There are all kinds of people; on weekdays, they are mostly businessmen but on weekends there are more families. However, they are all people I am meeting for the first time—people of different ages, genders and nationalities and with different purposes for their trip. I do not know any of them and I think it is this very fact that paves the way for the 'brief meetings' and 'once-in-a-lifetime encounters' that can only be had here, and it is why I want passengers to enjoy their shinkansen experience fully and have a pleasant journey.

It is not just the quality of the onboard facilities that makes a journey enjoyable—other factors, such as the attentiveness of the onboard staff and the availability of unusual local foods, can make a journey really memorable.

Recently, the service industry is emphasizing customer satisfaction (CS) and customer delight (CD). These are ephemeral feelings that a customer might not get if the service is always the same however good it might be, so excellent service is constantly evolving.

I often hear overseas visitors say they are delighted by the high quality of service in Japan but Japanese always expect some degree of good service as the norm, so the same good service day-after-day does not generate CS and CD. In other words, run-of-the-mill service does not continually please the Japanese customer.

This is why I think it is important to foresee the customers' needs, so I prepare thoroughly before coming face-to-face with them using a sales plan mapping out how I will work my way through the carriages and what I will sell to which kind of people. Then, as I push the wagon along the aisles, I observe the passengers closely to see the kind of people they are and grasp the nature of what it is that they might need.

However, an important point to remember when doing this is to check unobtrusively. A lot of Japanese are shy and some passengers look downwards out of shyness. I look not only at their faces, but also at their clothes, luggage and what they are eating, and I tune in to their conversations. Doing this enables me to make the first approach rather than waiting for them to call me.

Mind you, my predictions and preparations are not always on the mark. In this case, I swiftly make alterations and revise my sales plan according to the needs.

I put products that will sell at the front, of course, and make various other alterations such as changing how I

recommend products that will suit the customer, or changing my itinerary according to the situation.

My aim is to make passengers feel comfortable.

Creating Customer Rapport Naturally

However, there is more to do in order to make the customers comfortable. It is very important to be an approachable person who can create an atmosphere where it is easy for the passenger to buy something.

What do you have to do to become such a salesperson? First, I try to create a rapport with the customers in the short time available by showing my face time and again.

When I do this, passengers naturally come to remember my face and voice, and see me interacting with other people. This becomes imprinted in their minds without them realizing it and I gradually become a familiar face. With time and familiarity, some passengers become more relaxed, their faces gradually soften and they speak openly to me.

A similar process happens to me too. At first, I cannot fully relax in front of passengers but they gradually become imprinted in my mind without me realizing it and I get the feeling of knowing the people in the seats.

The thing is to show myself time and time again, and not just show myself but observe them to find out the kind of people they are, and make them aware of me as a person. It is important to speak loudly enough that passengers notice me but be careful not to speak too loudly and disturb them, and to make myself visible to as many passengers as possible. Making an appearance not only create sales opportunities but also creates a closer rapport as I become a familiar face.

Customer Feedback is Key

However, even if passengers are interested, they won't buy unless there are attractive products. I think that one role we play is helping with the discovery and development of new products. Although we don't make the products ourselves since we come into direct contact with customers, we can recognize their potential needs and link this awareness with attentive service. We often get hints from the opinions and comments we hear from the passengers.

For example, on the shinkansen, we sell ekiben lunchboxes featuring local specialties from along the line. These special lunches are loaded at each station and sold onboard but we sometimes find that the product line-up tends to become a little one-sided.

Beef is a specialty of Yonezawa in Yamagata Prefecture, so of course a boxed lunch featuring beef from locally reared cattle is popular and most of the boxed lunches loaded at Yonezawa Station feature beef. This generally delights most

Figure 1 Harakucchi Illustration Flyers

Harakucchi
はらくち
Midsommer Festival
Only for limited period!

Tasty rice sprinkled with ukogi furikake
The traditional taste of *ukogi* is a harbinger of spring in the snow country of Yonezawa. We sprinkle *furikake* made from dried *ukogi*/leaves on *domanaka*, the famous brand of Yamagata rice. (This *furikake* is a speciality of Otamaya in Yonezawa.)

What on earth is ukogi?
This is *ukogi*
Uesugi Youzan became the 9th feudal lord of Yonezawa at the age of 17 in 1767. Apparently, the thrifty Youzan encouraged the planting of *ukogi* hedges that could also be used as food when harvests were bad. This is how *ukogi* became an established part of the Yonezawa area's culinary culture.

Handmade Yonezawa beefburger
Yonezawa beef is a top brand of beef from selected Japanese Black cattle that have been reared in the Okitama-gun area for at least 12 months. Dig into this very special beefburger with its summery *ponzu* and grated *daikon* sauce!

Locally-grown shimeji mushrooms and vegetables
Yonezawa mountain *shimeji*, nourished by the pure underground waters and clear air of Akimine Azuma, are specially chosen for their freshness, flavour and texture. These *shimeji* have been boiled country-style in a slightly sweet broth with an assortment of other vegetables (grown by Bio Farm, Yonezawa).

Stewed meat and potatoes, a Yamagata speciality
This famous Yamagata dish originates from the 'stewed potato parties' held at the autumn harvest. It's a delicious mix of *taro*, beef and other ingredients slowly simmered in a soy sauce, sugar and *sake* broth.

Shinkineya's special gyorokke mousse
Try this healthy but filling new taste—a fish croquette filled with cod ground as smooth as mousse and Yamagata grown *ahhada* beans!

Salted trout, a Yamagata speciality
You'll be hooked!
Salting is a time-honoured way to preserve fish.

Boiled cherries
Yamagata cherries boiled whole in a pickling juice of *shiso* and *ume*. *Umeboshi* are a familiar part of Yamagata life (specialty of Bankiku Honpo Mitsukuya, Takahatamachi).

Seisai moromi
Yonezawa greens pickled in unrefined soy sauce really help the rice go down! And it's great to snack on with a drink (made by Otamaya, a long-standing miso maker in Yonezawa).

Fluffy tamagoyaki
Yonegyu, the Harakucchi mascot is stamped on this rolled sweet omelette. Isn't it cute!

Our summer special Dadacha-an mizumanju
We combine a flavourful *mizumanju* made with real Japanese arrowroot and Yamagata mashed green soybeans to create a summer dessert with cooling translucence and texture. (made by Kujiramochi Honpo Meiyu, Obanzawa).

この季節の味成すぞ!
いただきますの心を込めて下さないわ!!
Savour the taste of summer!
Only available at this time of year!

Limited edition summer flyer

(NRE)

Enjoy the taste of Yonezawa in Yonegyu's Harakucchi boxed lunch!

おはらくちと米沢とあがらとごやい!!

Salted trout, a Yamagata speciality
You'll be hooked!
Salting is a time-honoured way to preserve fish.

A plump delicious Yamagata umeboshi right at the centre.

Stewed meat and potatoes, a Yamagata speciality
Compare the flavours of the healthy Tengen pork sausage from the foothills of Mount Azuma with the smoked sausage from Takahatamachi, a Gold Prize winner 2 years running in Germany, the home of sausage.
This famous Yamagata dish originates from the 'stewed potato parties' held at the autumn harvest. It is a delicious mix of *taro*, beef and other ingredients slowly simmered in a soy sauce, sugar and *sake* broth.

Tama konnyaku, another Yamagata speciality—konnyaku balls made in Yonezawa are simmered in soy sauce with squid tentacles.

Pickled cherry blossoms coloured to look like rhododendrons—Yonezawa's flower. Use this to refresh your palate.

Simmered hijiki seaweed with Yonezawa uchimame, a traditional Yonezawa food, where green soybeans are mashed and added to simmered dishes!

Wow, Yonegyu is stamped on the tamagoyaki! Will you be able to bring yourself to eat it?

A mixture of shimeji and vegetables grown in Yonezawa, boiled country-style in slightly sweet broth.

This soba dango is a speciality of Toge no Chikara Mochi in front of Yonezawa Station. Flour from Yamagata-grown buckwheat is kneaded into smooth-pounded rice and made into this dango with tasty mashed green soybeans to make this delicious dessert!

A handmade Yonezawa beefburger
We've used the Yamagata brand of *domanaka* rice. It's Yamagata's most famous rice, renowned for its sheen and refreshing taste!
Yonezawa beef is highly-priced, deluxe meat from selected Japanese Black cattle that have been reared in the Okitama-gun area for at least 12 months. We've used this meat in our beefburger. Savour the unadorned meat taste with your first mouthful, and then enjoy your beefburger with Shinkineya's delicious special sauce.

Flyer normal period

(NRE)

passengers, but some regular travellers on the line say, 'I'm fed up with just beef' or 'I'd like a boxed lunch that includes a variety of foods'. However, since we've only prepared beef lunches, we cannot meet their wishes and they are left disappointed. All that we can do is recognize that we have let such customers down and apologize. However, I think that we shouldn't simply feel bad and then do nothing about it, so I decided to take action and instead of saying 'other boxed lunches don't sell as well', decided to make boxed lunches that would sell by using other local products that would help revitalize local communities by showcasing local foods that cannot be got elsewhere.

Getting Things Moving

I realized that a vague request for another style of boxed lunch might not produce something that really met customers' needs and would also inconvenience people who make them. Consequently, I decided to visit regional specialty shops and events in Tokyo department stores, search on the Internet for information, and consult with the boxed lunch makers.

The main dish I suggested was a deluxe burger made from Yonezawa beef. I also suggested *nikujaga*, a traditional Yamagata stewed meat and potato dish that I got to know when I started this job.

At first, the boxed lunch maker frowned on the idea of including home cooking like *nikujaga* in an ekiben, but I pleaded that it was bound to delight visitors from other prefectures and that it would also be 'comfort food' for local passengers.

Then there is a wiener sausage made in Takahatamachi in Yamagata which has won gold prizes in Germany. I also got a Japanese-style confectioner who makes a popular stuffed rice cake called *toge no chikara mochi* sold on shinkansen to make an original bite-sized Japanese sweet.

The main thing was to get things moving. I felt that by taking action and gathering up various hints I would get closer to the customer in real terms rather than just sitting at my desk racking my brains.

I incorporated the opinions of many of my colleagues as I set to work on creating a special ekiben, hoping it would bring a smile of delight to customers' faces.

The Menu

Since we had taken a lot of effort to create a special ekiben, I wanted as many customers as possible to understand the careful selection that had been made.

However, I didn't think it was sufficient to just insert a menu. Recently it's common to find a menu inside the boxed lunch but, personally, I rarely glance at them.

I thought hard about how to make a menu that customers

would actually look at and then I suddenly remembered a colleague who was good at drawing.

'That's it! I'll get someone to draw it!' I thought an illustrated menu introducing the product would probably catch people's attention.

We all worked on the wording to produce a very attractive and effective menu but because we had taken such pains with the contents of the boxed lunch we also wanted to get the name just right.

I decided to use the Yamagata dialect. Dialects in the northern Tohoku region have a warmth and gentleness to them, and the Yamagata dialect is no exception. I'm from Tokyo but getting this involved with the Tohoku area means that I naturally pick up its words and expressions. However, I hadn't learnt *harakucchi*, which was to become the name of the boxed lunch. I found it on the website of a Tohoku elementary school and the cuteness and warmth of this expression meaning 'full up' resonated with me. Local dialect was being introduced as part of the children's class work. In this way I found the perfect name for this carefully created ekiben.

This *makunouchi bento* contains rice and many different local dishes, and two versions are produced during the year. One is a summer version that offers customers seasonal dishes. I think that with the right ideas it will evolve into an even better and more attractive product.

In material terms, it incorporates a range of items, but I think the most important part is the thought that went into it.

We all pooled our ideas and worked hard to create this product, and the joy of directly providing customers with an ekiben we are proud of is something that cannot be felt when just selling a product that has been provided by someone else.

The very special nature of the *harakucchi* means that it is only produced in limited quantities for sale onboard the shinkansen. Even so, some regular customers look forward to it on their journeys. ■

Izumi Saito

Ms Izumi Saito is an onboard salesperson for shinkansen and limited express at NRE