KIKKOMAN AND ITS SOY SAUCE LESSON IN SCHOOLS

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**Introduction**

Ichiro Mori (pseudonym) of the Management Planning Office of Kikkoman faced an important dilemma. Under a new Japanese law, his company, Kikkoman, was required to promote food education as part of its business operations. As the Japanese government had identified food education as an important social need, many of the employees of Kikkoman believed that Kikkoman could meet this responsibility by providing a lesson that would teach school-aged children about the health benefits of eating nutritious food. As a manager, Ichiro was extremely worried about how to get his company into the public schools, and how he would train his employees to teach young children.

**New Food Education Law**

Since the 1990s, the Japanese national government has expressed strong concern about the diet of the young. The media started to report on the positive health implications of the historic Japanese food culture and suggested that food education should be introduced at an early age. The growing discussion about food education led to the passage of the Shokuiku Basic Act (food education law) in 2005, which promotes awareness and acquisition of knowledge about food and nutrition as a national movement.

This new law was the product of collaborative work of multiple ministries of the Japanese government in order to improve the diet of Japanese nationals of all ages. The law stipulates the responsibilities and duties of food makers. The law encourages the business community to cooperate with government and promote food education in business operations. Unlike the United States, corporate presence has not been welcomed in public schools in Japan. Public schools in Japan are primarily controlled by the national government. Due to this new law, however, schools and businesses have been encouraged to engage in food education which is now supported by the national government.

**Policy Changes**

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology of Japan (hereafter identified as the Ministry of Education) has an advisory group known as the Central Council for Education. It consists of professionals from various fields including the business world and provides recommendations to the national government regarding policy making to narrow the gap between governmental policies and practices. Based on growing demand from the industry and the recommendations from the advisory group, a special subject called “integrated study” was created in 2002 to encourage the partnering of business with education to promote topic-based exploratory learning that would cut across traditional subject areas (Cave, 2003, p.89).

During the period 2001 through 2005, the chairman of Kikkoman served as Vice Chair of the Central Council for Education. At meetings he made comments regarding a new subject called “integrated study” and pointed out there were some obstacles to the implementation of the new subject and suggested the need for decentralization. While the introduction of integrated study was a curriculum change for public schools, it also became a great opportunity for business leaders to reach out to school children as future customers. Even though the Shokuiku Basic Act of 2005 and “integrated study” originated from two separate issues, food makers realized that they could take advantage of this new subject which allowed business people as guest speakers into classrooms.

**Creating Soy Sauce Lesson as CSR**

Kikkoman is an internationally recognized soy sauce maker that has been in business for nearly a century and has over 5000 employees with operations around the world. In July 2004, Ichiro who was in charge of this food education project, deliberated about the food education program potentially provided by the company. Teaching school-aged children was not an activity the company had previously been engaged. As project leader, Ichiro believed that the majority of the employees wanted to provide a food education lesson in response to the social need identified by the new food education law. The team decided to consult with government officials of the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Agriculture, as well as educators and media reporters.

In October 2004, Ichiro realized that no employees had experience in providing lessons to young children. Therefore, in November 2004, he met again with his project members and discussed the food education program. They agreed to create a lesson involving soy sauce for the purpose of sending a unique message to young children. They also decided to use their own employees as instructors, hoping that the company could make the best use of their own employees for the long-term benefit of the program.

In February 2005, the company worked with educators who helped them change technical words into easy words for children to understand. Ichiro and his team members conducted a seminar with a teaching demonstration. However, Ichiro found that it was very difficult for instructors to explain the soy sauce making process to elementary school children. During the spring of 2005, he decided to write a role play scenario in which his own daughter could provide input. She was a fourth grader who repeatedly pointed out what she did not understand. With his daughter’s help, Ichiro continued to revise the role play until June 2005 when it was finally completed.

In May 2005, the company announced in newspapers its food education program as a corporate social responsibility (CSR) activity. Ichiro and his team chose to invite applications from employees to be instructors, instead of only using team members as instructors. He was surprised to learn that the number of applications exceeded expectations and was very pleased to know that many Kikkoman employees wanted to participate in the food education program and were passionate about talking about soy sauce to children. During the summer of 2005, Kikkoman consulted with education experts and provided the instructor candidates multiple times with training sessions, before they were sent to elementary schools.

**Soy Sauce Lesson**

The soy sauce lesson is 45 minutes. First, the corporate instructor asks children what food products contain soy sauce. Children answer this question. Second, after children are reminded how much soy sauce is part of their everyday snacks or meals, the instructor addresses the ingredients of soy sauce. Using three different black containers, children guess the ingredients inside by shaking them and listening to the sound. After the guessing game, children open the containers and are allowed to touch and smell the soy sauce ingredients. Third, after children learn about the ingredients of the soy sauce, the instructor shows a video regarding the soy sauce making process. The video first includes a virtual factory tour including how the company utilizes waste, soy sauce residuals, and then addresses an ecological issue. After the video, the instructor and children discuss several functions of soy sauce and the importance of enjoying meals. The instructor reveals that vanilla ice cream tastes better with a little bit of soy sauce. The lesson ends with an emphasis that meal time should be fun and should be shared with family members. After the lesson, the company gives the classroom teacher and students two different gifts: a mini-size bottle of soy sauce (100ml) and a postcard made from recycled paper using soy sauce residuals.

**Building its Reputation**

Ichiro had a difficult time approaching schools because unlike American counterparts, there was no established communication channel between schools and business. Therefore, the company asked for help from a Board of Education member in central Japan. With his help, the company was able to obtain support from public school teachers, and began conducting lessons at three schools in September 2005. The company hit its highest net income of 10,125 million yen (approximately $86 million) for the fiscal year 2005, which ended March 31, 2006. The number of elementary schools that invited Kikkoman’s soy sauce lessons also continued to grow and reached more than 100 schools in 2009. The company started to enjoy an improved reputation among public school teachers who often commented, “I learned that Kikkoman cares about children and the environment.” The mass media positively reported on the company and their social responsibility activities. The business has continued to grow in the last decade and the Kikkoman group posted over 3 billion US dollars in annual net sales (consolidated) in 2013.