

Calling card: the evolution of business cards in Japan

Examining the significance of the almighty meishi

[J.J. O'Donoghue](#) May 6, 2017



Back to basics: Business cards should be offered and received with two hands. | ISTOCK

On the afternoon of Jan. 26, 1948, a man claiming to be a public health official walked into a branch of Teikoku Ginko (Imperial Bank) in Tokyo's Shiinamachi district and told all 16 people present that dysentery had broken out in the neighborhood.

After handing bank clerks a business card that identified him as an epidemiologist, the man told everyone present to drink a few drops of

liquid he claimed was a remedy. The liquid, however, was actually poison.

Twelve of the 16 people died, and the man escaped with cash and checks worth ¥160,000.

The Teigin Incident, as the crime came to be known, was one of postwar Japan's most sensational mass-murder cases. A painter named Sadamichi Hirasawa was subsequently tried, found guilty and sentenced to death for the crime.

Hirasawa was arrested on evidence police uncovered that related to the exchange of business cards with personal details. There had been two other extremely similar cases of attempted theft at banks via the use of poison in the months prior to the robbery. In both cases, a lone male left a business card at the scene of the crime.

In one of the two incidents, the perpetrator used a card that was marked "Shigeru Matsui" of the health ministry. The original owner of the card produced an alibi for the afternoon of Jan. 26, 1948, and told police that Hirasawa was among those to whom he had given his card.

Many mysteries still remain over the incident, including what kind of poison was used and whether Hirasawa was wrongfully convicted of the crime.

However, the incident also shows how much sway a business card measuring roughly 5½ cm x 9 cm has in Japan. Business cards open doors and, in extreme cases, bank vaults.

Proof of visitation

Business cards (*meishi*) are indispensable in Japan. Everyone from bank managers and taxi drivers to teachers and even gang members carries one.

According to Song Ki-dong, CEO of Printomo printing company, the

market value of business cards in Japan was about ¥420 billion in 2011.

“There are about 70 million businessmen and women in Japan right now and most order a batch of business cards at least three times a year,” Song says in an interview on the company’s website.

How business cards arrived in Japan and how they subsequently came to play such an essential role in networking and corporate communications is open to speculation.

Takashi Nakano, director of the Japan Business Card Association, says that a number of theories exist on the origins of *meishi* in Japan.

“Business cards were originally meant as a proof of visitation,” Nakano says.

Meishi contains the Chinese characters for “name” (*mei*) and “to stick” (*shi*). Confusingly, the kanji for the verb “to stick” can also be read as “paper” or “card,” which explains why *meishi* is sometimes — incorrectly — translated as “name card.”



Takashi Nakano | COURTESY OF TAKASHI NAKANO

Nakano says that in 15th-century China it was common to make small cards from bamboo bearing a person’s name. These cards would then be placed in a window or door, as a type of calling card that provided evidence of a visit and signified an intention to return.

It’s believed that the forerunner to the *meishi* that has come to be enshrined in business and social encounters arrived via Europe sometime in the 19th century, probably during the Meiji Era (1868-1912), a period in

which Japan was prized open and Western fads flooded in.

Another theory suggests that Commodore Matthew C. Perry's delegation carried business cards with them when the Black Ships sailed into Tokyo Bay in 1853.

"The people who were on the ship with Perry already had something that looked like business cards to identify themselves," Nakano says. "The Japanese side copied this name card system, thus setting up *meishi*."

Given the tension surrounding the Black Ships' unexpected arrival, it's unlikely that both parties put aside their suspicions to exchange business cards in the formal ritual known as *meishi kōkan*.

It's the etiquette surrounding this ritual that sets the business card in Japan apart from almost everywhere else in the world.

Nakano says the *meishi kōkan* probably owes something to the Shinto tenet of imbuing the quotidian with ceremonial graft.

He draws parallels between exchanging business cards and other rituals in Shintoism — namely, bowing and clapping before the small Shinto shrines found in homes and businesses.

Remembering the rules

Witnessing an exchange of business cards in Japan can make even the most casual observer feel like an amateur anthropologist.

The participants assess the status and seniority of each respective member, with the lowest in hierarchy offering their business cards first in an preordained manner. Upon receipt, the cards are studied with reverence.

"When you meet someone in Japan, it's almost like a ceremony," says Keizo Yamada, director of the Kansai chapter of The American Chamber of

Commerce in Japan. “There are so many pieces of etiquette and manners that if you don’t understand how to exchange meishi properly, people will notice.”

Many companies offer a “manners class” to train employees in the exchange of business cards to help avoid potential missteps.

Senior employees are also tasked with showing novices how to conduct themselves appropriately when exchanging business cards, offering advice on making small talk and flattery.

While foreign businessmen and women are not expected to know the intricacies of exchanging business cards, it’s respectful to learn a few basic rules, Yamada says.

Pernille Rudlin, a Europe, Middle East and Africa representative for Japan Intercultural Consulting, agrees.

“It’s not a great idea to go in there and start flicking your meishi across the desk at people,” Rudlin says. “That will cause a slight, sharp intake of breath.”

Rudlin says the manners behind exchanging business cards are formal and socially accepted, placing everyone on the same footing as all parties introduce themselves.

“Meishi provide a nice protocol for approaching people. It’s less awkward because there’s a standard procedure,” Rudlin says. “Everybody knows what the rules are, so you just go by the rules.”

Rudlin likens the process to writing formal emails in Japanese. Such correspondence is laden with polite language and idiosyncrasies but provides a bridge to where the sender wants to get.

In contrast, Rudlin says that many of her Japanese clients based overseas

struggle to handle the freestyle networking events that are held abroad. Such events require participants to mingle and “work” a room.

Importance of context

The intricate minutiae of exchanging a business card represent more than just an elaborate ritual, says Takayoshi Kasuga, creative director of Mill, a design studio in Osaka. They also help to start a conversation.

“Exchanging a business card acts as an ice-breaker,” Kasuga says. “If you meet someone and you can’t immediately discern their name from the Chinese characters they are comprised of, it gives you something to ask them about.”



Takayoshi Kasuga | J.J. O'DONOGHUE

Rudlin, who routinely works with Japanese clients, says she hands over her business card partly as an excuse to explain her name.

“If I just say my name, you can see their faces panicking because there’s too many L’s and R’s in there,” Rudlin says. “They’re thinking, ‘What? She’s a vanilla ice cream?’”

Rudlin’s business card helps provide more context. It also helps to make an impression when she tells her interlocutors that her name does indeed sound like vanilla, but starts with a “pa” sound.

“They remember who I am,” she says.

Rudlin’s experiences go a long way to explaining why business cards have continued to survive in our increasingly digitized environment.

Almost everyone who contributed material to this article said that business

cards help give recipients an impression of the other party. The universal theme is clear: Your meishi is you.

The impact of technology on business cards has largely been auxiliary.

Exchanging business cards, by definition, requires direct communication. Such physical introductions help form personal connections between two strangers.

While technology such as QR codes and near-field communications enable our smartphones and electronic devices to share screeds of information in an instant, it fails to help transform that information into an impression.

“A well-designed meishi can have a big impact,” says Alberto Castellazzi, an associate professor of power electronics at the University of Nottingham and a frequent business traveler to Japan. “Visual contact with all that information within a given context makes it much easier to make mental associations that help remember some particular aspects of a meeting or person’s characteristics.”

Castellazzi recalls an event in the Czech Republic he once attended where the organizers provided a gadget that enabled the transfer of meishi-type information via smartphones. Nevertheless, he says, attendees still reached for their business cards.

Nakano, who has an eight-panel business card himself, echoes this point.

“People don’t realize that business cards are a sales promotion tool,” Nakano says.

Nakano, who has written a book on the power of business cards, says that in comparison to other sales materials — an email, text message or sales letter that people typically ignore and delete — a business card can be memorable.

He recalls a number of times in which he has received a phone call several years after exchanging a business card with another person.



Training day: A number of companies offer a 'manners class' to train new employees in the exchange of business cards to help avoid potential missteps. | ISTOCK

Keeping the cards

Exchanging business cards is obviously an important part of networking in Japan, but what's the best way of managing meishi once they start stacking up on the desk in front of you?

Yamada says he might collect between 100 and 200 business cards in a particularly busy month. Indeed, it's not unusual for him to exchange around 1,000 business cards a year.

"It's difficult to organize them," Yamada says. The solution, like so much

else these days, lies in technology, specifically digital applications. Yamada uses Card Cam, an app that stores and organizes meishi data. Nakano uses a similar app called Eight.

While these management systems are handy — and free for the basic packages — they are also time-consuming, which explains the extant domestic market for books, binders and pouches in which to store business cards that have been collected.

According to data compiled by market research company Seed Planning, the value of the market for meishi data storage and management is expected to reach ¥5.8 billion in 2018.

Once a business card has been collected, however, how long should one hold onto it?

Nakano ditches a business card once he has transferred the information to an email newsletter or Facebook. Most people, however, hold on to them for a lot longer, squirreling them away in binders, drawers and even shoe boxes.

It's worth pointing out that Japanese business cards are a shade bigger than Western cards. There is often room for creativity when it comes to design — up to a point.

Rudlin, who worked for Mitsubishi Corp. in Japan in the 1990s, recalls a time when the company issued business cards with headshot photographs in a stamp format.

Derek Fitzgerald, a representative with the Irish Development Authority in Tokyo, has a collection of hundreds of meishi rounded up from as many meetings.

One of his favorites is an ultrathin business card that was made from a wood shaving, which belonged to a banker in Tokyo. It was made to bend,

Fitzgerald recalls.

“I went to bend it, but I thought better of breaking it in front of the client,” Fitzgerald says.

That said, the information listed on the vast majority of business cards is fairly universal: name, position, company and contact information. The information is often printed in Japanese on one side and English on the other.

Indeed, the strangest thing a person can do in terms of their business cards is probably not to have one at all.

Nakano says that celebrities sometimes decline to exchange business cards, as they prefer to keep their personal information private and their status should guarantee that they are already known.

Nevertheless, not having a meishi tends to arouse suspicion, even if you genuinely forgot to bring your business card holder or are waiting for a new batch to arrive from the printer.

“If you don’t have a business card in Japan,” Yamada says, “it’s difficult for people to gauge who you are and who you represent.”

Haruka Iwamoto contributed to this report.

A primer on exchanging business cards in Japan

It’s important to exchange business cards correctly in Japan. In addition to the simple exchange of contact information, participants are often trying to glean as much information as they can about their interlocutor and that person’s company.

Takashi Nakano, whose company Soul Products advises business clients on business cards, says that the exchange of meishi offers you an opportunity

to make an impression on your counterpart.

Here's a list of basic rules that Nakano follows when exchanging a business card:

(a) offer your card with two hands;

(b) receive your counterpart's card with two hands;

(c) ensure the card is turned towards the receiver; ensure no names or logos are covered up when you offer your card;

(d) if the person you are exchanging cards with outranks you in terms of seniority, you should offer your business card first;

(e) if the person you are exchanging cards with outranks you in terms of seniority, you should offer it at a lower level than the other person; and

(f) after receiving a business card, you should read over the contents and either place it facing upright on top of your cardholder on the table or, if standing, place it on your cardholder in your left hand until the other person has moved on.

“You need to look at what's written on a business card very carefully and ask questions, if you can, in order to show that you are interested in that person,” Nakano says. “And don't talk about yourself the whole time.”