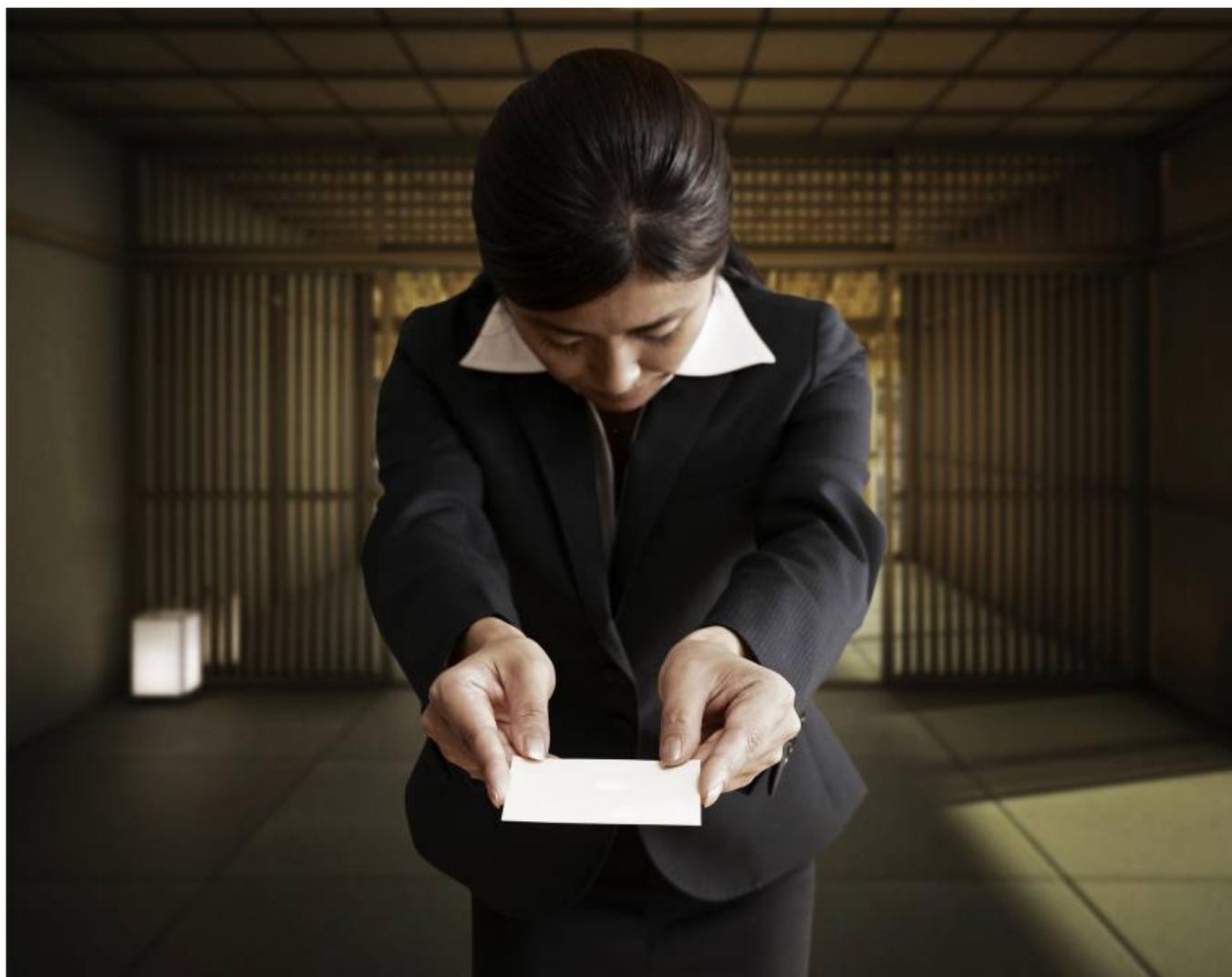


Business cards in Japan: So many rules, so easily and often broken

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Two-handed technique: One of the first things visitors learn about meeting and greeting in Japan is the importance of business card etiquette. Yet when it comes to the content of cards, many Japanese let rip and get creative. | ISTOCK

Many people will have heard that in Japan, exchanging business cards is very important. Business card etiquette — something I doubt very much even exists in my home country — is still strong in Japan, and one gets a chance to practice this protocol almost daily here. If you're being

introduced to someone, even outside of business, they'll often proffer you their card.

These cards are very handy to obtain, especially if the person has one side of the card printed in English. Japanese names are hard enough for nonnatives to remember (Nishida or Nishina? Nakamura or Nakamuro? Nakakawa or Nakagawa?), so having a card makes it easier for many of us.

But as with other Japanese customs, once translated into English, things might not always go as smoothly as the cardholder would expect.

For example, foreign newcomers are taught that, when receiving a Japanese person's business card, to not just stuff it into your pocket or wallet without taking the time to read the card and note the person's title. We are also told that it is polite to make some sort of comment that shows interest in the person. You might say, "Oh, I see you are the section chief," or ask what their company's most popular product is.

OK, that sounds easy, right? But just when you think you've got it down, someone hands you a card where, under their name is the title "Organ donor." What do you ask? "So, how's your left kidney these days?"

Another card I acquired noted the person was a "Member of the Dead Parrot's Society." Upon the loss of someone's parrot, indeed, what do you say?

It's a wonder business cards even include the word "business" anymore, since so many seriously diverge from any relation to industry. Even business-like cards seem closer to advertisements these days, with home page addresses, blog URLs and QR codes.

Local Japanese officials usually have their city or town's mascot on their cards, whether it be a smiling piece of oversize fruit or some animated pudgy blob expelling some innocuous English utterance such as "Oh!"

Interestingly, if there is English on the back of these cards, they are curiously devoid of these cartoons.

I received a card the other day that said the person's occupation was "Writing and painting," which seems very congruous, even business-like. But I have another that reads "Artist/pharmacist." Perhaps my comment when examining this one should be "Am I missing something here?"

Restaurant business cards tend to have maps on the back that, as long as you don't try to follow them, are a nice touch. Scenic photos of particular regions are popular on the cards of prefectural tourism authorities. But my favorite cards are those of photographers, because their profession needs no more introduction than a fresh, inspiring photo of nature.

While it used to be common to receive a card with a person's photo on it, these days I've procured quite a few with illustrated head shots. Both of these make sense because you are more likely to remember the person's face long after you've put the card away.

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But I was a bit puzzled by a card offered me the other day from someone working at the prefectural library, which featured a photo of the massive athenaeum on the front. I couldn't think of any possible comment except: "Oh, that looks just like ... a library!"

Another point that new arrivals are taught is that you should never write on a Japanese person's business card. So, the other day, I was flabbergasted when a man extended to me his colorful card, the entire

bottom of which was a white speech bubble titled “Memo.” I don’t know about you, but after all these years of Japanese business etiquette, that just makes my stomach turn.

Retired people seem to be at the forefront of “hobby”-type cards. I suppose that once you leave your company, you’re at a loss about not having some way to represent yourself. And heck, a business card is a great way to get the word out about some passion of yours. Many retirees seem to relish in pushing one last declaration about their lifetime: “Forever Young!” Or “Romance Man!”

Another oddity of business card culture is that sailors in Japan, in common with sailors the world over, will, without fail, present you with cards that feature their boat on the front. A typical sailor’s card will say “S/Y Dugong” followed by the make and length of the boat. “S/Y” is the abbreviation for “sailing yacht” and “Dugong” would be the name of the boat. “S/V” is also used, meaning “sailing vessel. At least in these cases, the polite comment is always the same: “”Nice boat!”

Occasionally in Japan, I am surprised to not receive a business card at all. I had a visit from three women from the same company, one of whom I was already acquainted with. The other two never gave me their card, even though I provided them with mine.

When I followed up on this later, the acquaintance explained that one girl had “rudely” forgotten to give me her card, but that the other wasn’t expected to because she only happened to be with them that day, and was thus just a bystander.

In addition, I found out that at one TV station at least, only the production staff and directors have cards, whereas the cameramen generally don’t. This is because any business communication should be carried out through the director (or producer) and not the cameraman.

It's a good thing I had someone to explain all this to me, because with all the talk about business card protocol in Japan, you'd think it was scrutinized as closely as a bout of sumo.

The business card seems to be one exception when Japanese people are permitted, even encouraged, to break out of the norm and stand out in the crowd. Did I just say that? Yes, this is also Japan.

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