Strong sales of beauty products make Panasonic manager a star

By YURI KAGEYAMA

Panasonic Corp. has been one of the few major Japanese companies to feature women as product designers, a role that has long been dominated by men. But the company's new star designer is a woman: Shiori Yamada, manager of the beauty care division, who is leading the development of an array of new beauty gadgets for women.

"All you have to do is put it beside your pillow and turn on the switch. You don't need to do a thing," Yamada, a demure woman with a steadfast gaze, said at the company's Tokyo office. "Everyone wants to be beautiful, but it's hard to find the time."

"If these new programs help some women designers get noticed and promoted to a place where they can take the lead in designing many products, not just hair dryers, then I think it's great," Aarons-Mele said. "It's not enough for a company to have smart women who know how to market to women, and bosses can't hope to match.

Yamada, 36, is a rare exception in corporate Japan. Her success at Panasonic comes despite the difficulties women still face in this male-dominated culture, where women typically build opportunities by capitalizing on their gender — not by seeking a level playing field free of stereotypes.

Japanese women make up just 9 percent of senior officials and managers — a tiny share compared with 43 percent in the U.S., 17 percent in China and 38 percent in France, according to data from the International Labor Office compiled by Catalyst Inc., a New York-based nonprofit that pushes for business opportunities for women.

Despite its reputation as one of Japan's more egalitarian major companies, Panasonic had just 2,000 women among its 38,000 managers — about 5 percent — although the number of female managers at the company tripled over the last four years.

For many female managers, the beauty care division is the place to start. Panasonic ads for hair Care are plastered on commuter trains, perfect places to catch the eye of working women. The posters, some of them electronic, woo women-on-the-go buyers with phrases like: "I don't have time these days to look good," and "From busy to beautiful."

Yamada's booming sales record has helped another woman win promotion to Panasonic's marketing post for electric shavers.

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And so the woman manager has cast a male heartthrob singer in the new Panasonic shaver ads, designed to win over women. The posters, some of them electronic, woo women-on-the-go buyers with phrases like: "I don't have time these days to look good," and "From busy to beautiful."

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