

TAKING A CHANCE

Starting up Net portal for women turns into lifetime career choice

By HIROKO NAKATA

Staff writer

Kikuko Yano was searching for a job she could do her entire life, and found it in the Internet firm she started on her own.

Yano's career as a magazine editor helped her found cafeglobe.com, a front-runner in Internet portals catering to working Japanese women.

Yano founded the site in 1999, when Internet use began proliferating in Japan. The site (www.cafeglobe.com)

began drawing attention for its wide range of content, which includes not only fashion, but also economics and politics — topics women's magazines usually avoid.

The site has been a success. It currently draws about 400,000 visitors a month — larger than most monthly magazines — and logs about 8 million page views.

The first thing the company had going for itself was timing.



Found her calling: Cafeglobe.com
President Kikuko Yano speaks at her office in Chiyoda Ward, Tokyo, on Aug. 3. YOSHIAKI MIURA PHOTO

"The era of the Internet was coming, so I thought I should start the Web site as soon as possible," the 47-year-old president told The Japan Times in an interview.

Cafeglobe.com advanced quickly, chalking up its first monthly profit in March 2001 and first annual profit in 2003.

Another plus has been its e-commerce platform.

The portal conducts marketing on visitors, mostly working women in their 20s and 30s, and sells clothing, shoes, cosmetics and other goods online.

But launching the company was not easy. When Yano began working as a magazine editor more than 20 years ago, she found herself spending countless days and nights on the job. That was when she started wondering how long she'd be able to keep it up. Until her 60s? Unlikely.

"I wondered what I could do to work on the front lines as long as I live," Yano said.

The idea nagged her for a few years. Then she made the decision to quit her job and become a doctor. She started attending a preparatory school to pass the entrance exam for medical school.

"I thought that doctor and lawyer jobs were those worth betting one's life on," she said, adding that the idea stemmed from all the health stories featured in magazines.

Kikuko Yano's career highlights

1985 — Joins Nikkei Business Publications Inc.

1986 — Becomes a freelance writer and editor.

1999 — Establishes cafeglobe.com and opens Web site.

2000 — Cafeglobe.com begins Web consulting and Web page production business.

2001 — Cafeglobe.com logs first monthly profit.

2003 — Cafeglobe.com starts e-commerce business and generates first annual profit.

But her dream ran into a major setback after 20 months when, after passing the test for a private medical school, she failed to get into a public one. There was no way she could afford the extremely high tuition at the private school.

Yano continued to study anyway with plans to try again the next year but soon found that she was unable to support herself. So she returned to her original life, spending 24 hours a day as a magazine editor.

But things were different this time, thanks to a feature story that changed her life at age 31. The topic: "Japanese women who work across the world."

"I thought the topic was the only one I could do then, physically and mentally," she said. So she applied for a related job.

She spent three to four years traveling in the United States, Europe, Singapore and Hong Kong to interview working Japanese women. The interviews moved her, she said, because these people were directly experiencing political and social tensions outside Japan and naturally had a better understanding of politics and economics — two topics many Japanese women are unfamiliar with, she said.

That was when she decided to start her own business.

Yano set up shop on the Internet in November 1999, and the rest is history. Her site runs a column on domestic political news and offers news reports from more than 50 cities around the world.

The highest hurdle Yano had to overcome was her unfamiliarity with business management.

"I'm totally a layperson in the fields of business management because all I had done was just work as a magazine editor," Yano said.

The fact that the Internet was such a new industry at the time was a plus for Yano, and many people have given her advice on dealing with the ins and outs of

running a business.

Still, Japan is not a good place for entrepreneurs compared with the United States, where the whole idea of Internet startups was born, she said.

"It is not comfortable to start a business in Japan. People didn't learn it was an option to start up a firm, and there are few people who succeed in doing it around you," she said.

Although Yano admitted the global economic slump is weighing on her business, she believes she made the right decision.

"I had a job that I wanted to do, and there was no other option for me but starting up a new business in order to continue what I wanted to do," she said.

In this occasional series, we interview entrepreneurs whose spirit may hold the key to a more competitive Japan.

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