

### Consumer's activity to solve problem

**Ms. Michiko Senoo, Executive Director, Kobe Consumer's Association and Federation of Women's Organization**

1960 Executive Director, Kobe Federation of Women's Organization

1967 Executive Director, Kobe Consumer's Association

1975-1992 Council Member, Social Policy Council, Rice Price Council, Price Stabilization Policy Meeting

1987-1997 Professor, University of Marketing and Distribution Sciences

2000 Administrative Director, Kobe NPO Kagayaki Support Center

We had an interview with Ms. Michiko Senoo, Executive Director of Kobe Consumer's Association who has been Executive Director for thirty years or more and promoted consumer's activity in Kobe. As we know on this interview, consumer's activity in Kobe has a feature to focus on solving problems. In addition to that, people don't concede others with ideal or philosophy and compensate for problems through negotiation in the activity but they gather information by themselves and discuss it based on the specified standard and objective measuring criteria to announce the data. Such consumer's activity is highly evaluated among all activities in Japan and the Association has steadily had better results through an agreement by companies and government. On this interview, we'd like her to explain not only the past and current consumer's activity to clarify the feature but also talk about how Kobe Consumer's Association deals with the current new issues of consumer's problem such as care insurance, convenient store and Internet. When we read this top interview, we'll understand that consumer's problems by purchasing products and service are going to be complicated, the ways of consumer activity for such problem and how consuming government would be. Furthermore, general companies can understand consumer's viewpoint, problems for corporate marketing and service activity. In addition, we expect that they will find a key point for corporate management or to solve their problems from management of consumer group with various sense of values.

### Stance of Kobe Consumer's Association

**Interviewer:** I feel one of the features of consumer's activity by Kobe consumer's association is to make a subjective data with the specified criteria and announce it. Do you have awareness of it?

**Ms. Senoo:** People originally might misunderstand consumer activity. Especially, the top of general companies thought it as things that consumer's activity opposed to their action. There were such cases before but I thought they might have such misunderstanding. This is so old story that everybody doesn't know it. We had a problem of increasing the price of milk as the initial consumer's activity. Everybody was very upset at that time if the price increased only ¥5. To say it clearly, we started to have a policy of never having a quarrel since then. If I say so, people might think we always follow others but quarrel means an emotional dispute between both sides. If we have a theoretical dispute each other, we can't say it as quarrel. Therefore, we always

prevent having quarrel as our policy. If I say it in an easy-to-understand and polite expression, we try to understand the other person's position. We have to make the other person understand our position and know each other to do something. This is our thought behind a word of never having a quarrel. We were persistent to such position that companies think we both could understand each other through discussion. I mean company at that time isn't a big company but retail association and unions consisting of meat or fish merchant. People in such group thought we can understand each other through discussion. If we talk about the price increase each other once, we might meet halfway to change the price from ¥5 to ¥3. When they wanted to increase the price of public bath, we couldn't help receiving it but gave them a request to make a ticket or something. Now it's usual to use a ticket but it was very popular at that time. Therefore, it's important to talk about anything first which is the basic way to solve a problem. Anyone who does business or any companies has to survive and have family or employees to support on its back. Therefore, we don't think all actions as bad but study and understand the reason of the action. If we oppose the price increase, we try to take measure for it to understand each other. It connects to our policy of never having a quarrel. When Mr. Yamashita was President of Matsushita Electric Industrial, I was asked to talk about Japanese consumer's activity by Kansai Economic Foundation and went to its office in Osaka. A leader of the Federation said to me, "You're the first person in the consumer's Association to enter our office from the front door." Consumer's activity was so misinterpreted by the top of companies as to be said such an irony. However, since companies try to listen what our group says, @@@, they understand us to say, "I understand what you say." If we strongly oppose it and they don't listen our opinion, it's as if a barking dog never bites therefore we always do our best way to tell them to listen to our thought.

### **Criteria of overlapping**

**Ms. Senoo:** I would rather like the way of thinking in science and mathematics. We had the first activity to stop overlapping in Tokyo where Mr. Minobe was a governor. We didn't think overlapping was one of the environmental issues at that time and had a conflict of constructing a garbage disposal facility which was expressed as "War of garbage" in Tokyo. Tokyo's government was forced to do "No lapping" It means we don't want to use lapping. I thought it was something wrong. It doesn't make any sense. We need minimum lapping. We also can't walk naked. We can't help covering something on the product. Therefore, we didn't say, "No lapping" but appealed to observe the minimum rule for lapping and stop unnecessary lapping. Lapping has a role of protecting product, so we have to remove redundant things except for important part. There were two activities both in Tokyo and Kobe for overlapping however two consumer's activities started with two different concepts of "No lapping" and "Stop unnecessary lapping" it had much difference in the way of thinking from the beginning. However, a manager of Daimaru said to me, "You said to stop overlapping but we would rather sell product better with it. Nobody says no overlapping except for people who do the activity. It's strange." I was so angry to hear it. I thought we had to think about the reason to prevent us from receiving such opinion. Then I got an idea of the first criteria of overlapping. I mean I set a rule for the way of thinking about

overlapping. This was a start point that we decided the criteria to develop a consumer's activity. We human beings are so selfish because when we receive a gift, we feel it overlapped but we'll overlap it to look good when giving it to someone. We change the way of thinking if we have different position. As the man of Daimaru says, it's natural that greatly overlapped product will be sold well. In order to make everybody understand the activity, we thought to set the standard to decide what overlapping was. If people use unnecessary lapping paper to never meet the standard, we regard it as overlapping. If their lapping fulfills the criterion, we think it as acceptable. Therefore, we set the first standard. At this time, I focused on the cost of lapping first. We clarified all costs of product to lapping paper to understand the cost of lapping. To say it easily, there is a sugar in a can. For example, it has 3 kg of sugar there. If we calculate sales price of a department store, we'll know the cost of sugar. For example, the sugar is sold at ¥3,000 in the shop. At that time, the price of 3kg of sugar was sold at ¥1,600. If it's sold at ¥3,000, the lapping cost will be ¥1,400 when we think it simply. Since it accounts for more than 15% of the total price, we should think it as overlapping. We tried to focus on the cost as one of the standard to think overlapping. One more focus point is a lapping space. Taking an example of soap, it's lapped in a box one by one. If we take it out of the box and put it in a large box, there is unnecessary space in the box. If the space accounts for 15% or more, we can say it as overlapping. That's why we focused on it. We targeted at both cost and space to prevent overlapping.

There were some packages that we couldn't throw it away. For example, there was detergent in a can which we didn't know we bought either a can or detergent. Kinshobai, a shop to sell Tsukudani, food boiled in soy sauce is still sold a product in a beautiful pottery. We don't know the shop wants to sell Tsukudani or pottery. We can think such package as overlapping. We also found men's folding umbrella and cigarette were sold together in a box. Such compulsory set of products also has redundant package. They are men's products but don't have any relation each other. Therefore, we had better recognize it as overlapping. In addition to that, there are some products lapped with wasteful materials. We focused on cost, space, outlook, materials and everything to decide the first standard and had an activity to prevent overlapping to think it with everybody together. Companies thought it interesting because we tried to fight them with criteria. At the end of this year that we started an activity with the criteria, the sugar in a can wasn't sold at all in a department store. We announced the cost of sugar was ¥1,600 in case that the price was ¥3,000. In case of ¥5,000, the cost of sugar was two thousand of several hundreds of yen. That's why it couldn't be sold. The department store suffered from it and thought what they should do.

**Interviewer:** The activity gave a big impact on everyday because you clarified the criteria with figure.

**Ms. Senoo:** Yes. It easily convinces us as a kind of theory. An executive of Meiji Dairies Corporation in the Tokyo Office told me he was upset for the activity. I remember it very well a year or a year and half after the activity, the Ministry of Trade and Economic made a package standard which was almost similar to our standard and all figures was described as more than 20%. It's good to be 20%. What we calculated was also about 20%. If we say 20%, people think it's 25%. If we say it's 15%, they think it as 20%. We decided it to forecast such situation. This was the first case that we theoretically did activity. We tried to think about

anything like that. Therefore, we have a history to develop our activity while we continue to make a criteria and rule. However, we have a problem now. It was the time of rational consumption before. The rational consumption means that people buy a product while they judge whether it's good or bad. The times were changing gradually and people bought a product with sensitivity. I mean they bought it whether they liked it or not. So, the criteria became invalid. Even if the product doesn't meet the standard and people want to buy it because they like it, we can't say anything to them. The criteria didn't work well because of the changes from rational consumption to sensitivity. However, concerning overlapping, we started to think about environmental issues for good or bad at that time therefore companies had to consider it as the issue and we didn't have to keep such criteria. People started to think about whether the overlapping was good or bad from the viewpoint of environmental issue and changes of the whole world saved us. In any cases, women's sensitivity is really great especially women who do chores everyday. Taking a concrete example, a green grocery sells peeled small potatoes in a bag or burdock. However, the color of them is different from what we cook them by themselves. General housewives say, "Why do they become such white? What are they so different from what we do? It's strange." This is a sensible or sensuous issue. We will get problem in such way. General consumer groups start to make a fuss only for the fact but we don't do so. We have to pursue the reason why they are so white. We try to analyze it scientifically. If we do so, we'll know they are white with some chemicals and talk about the safety problem that the chemicals are bad for health. The grocery shop is sure to use chemicals which are strange. We also talk about what chemicals they use and what kind of chemicals they prohibit using. This is scientific activity. Therefore, we honestly receive real women's sophisticated sense and sensitivity. As I said before, we always find scientific reason to know distinguish whether in fact it's good or bad quality, which will be consistent as an consumer activity. We continue development of activity.

**Interviewer:** It's been taken over for a long time and everybody think it natural.

### **Evaluation of care insurance**

**Ms. Senoo:** Whatever we consumer's activity group do, we make a research before doing action. We introduced this third person's evaluation of care insurance for the first time in Japan which was very paid much attention. We clearly said it first that this didn't mean to force nursing care centers to be bankrupt or confess them, but we made a research for such centers and told them their problem and gave an advice. We evaluate such centers to cultivate them. We hand over such basic attitude from the beginning. We think to understand each other if we communicate more. Everybody tries to have an opportunity to discuss each other.

**Interviewer:** You talk about an evaluation of care insurance, I'll ask you the evaluation system of the care insurance service provider. There is an unclear part that users originally don't judge quality of the service in advance. In addition since users are elderly people, they would rather tend to choose such facility for personal

relationships than its service. In some ways, the system to evaluate such difficult to see or judge service is so important.

**Ms. Senoo:** The biggest doubt for me is why everybody doesn't think it the care insurance as consumer's problem. This means measure changes to contract. The conventional civilian measure changed to contract. It means sell and purchase that is the relationship between seller and buyer. If so, the top of such service provider doesn't do anything for us week consumer but we have to think about the service based on the contract each other. We don't have such awareness that we'll have various problems for it. Furthermore, the contract of care insurance is different from that of product. It's service contract. There are some characteristics for service. One of the features is service contract and the target users are elderly people as week consumer. It's too exaggerated to say that they'll have contract in a closed room. Since such elderly and the top of facility will have a contract for the service, it's a little bit different from general service. This isn't wedding and funeral service, neither. Regardless of such contract with several bad conditions, it's strange that everybody doesn't think it as a consumer's problem. This is a start point that we think it as the problem. We see the insurance from such viewpoint for a long time and listen to what the Ministry of Health and Welfare says. It says "Everybody can choose any service provider, it emphasizes people have the right to choose whatever they want to use. However, they can't choose it if there is no information to compare first. Despite having no such information, we can't choose it even if we have the right to do it. It's strange. Therefore, we continued to think how we made information to choose it and publicized it to everybody for a long time. This is the thing that we have to do first. As you know, since evaluation for services varies among different people. It's so ambiguous. Any fair organization has to make criteria to measure such specific information. It should evaluate the quality with such criteria. In order to evaluate the quality, we have to make fair standard for the third person and make a fair investigation based on the standard. Then, we provide users with such result as information so that they can choose service provider. This is the general way to think about. There is no system in the present care service at all. Who evaluates the quality and where we can get such information and who provides it, such doubt leads to connect to make this third party evaluation organization.

**Interviewer:** I think it's so unique to think the insurance as a consumer problem. Service providers might think they will assume to give people service but we think it as an issue of choice and consumer. In addition to that, this relates to the previous story, if we make an evaluation with the criteria, we can easily understand theory. We can think like how the level of criteria is or what reason makes such level, so we can prevent a she-said battle or tug of war. Is this system effective?

**Ms. Senoo:** Yes. However, there is a problem in the system. There is a care manager in charge of care insurance. He makes a care plan. Elderly people will receive various services according to the plan. However, this care manager isn't independent. He belongs to the service provider and everything connects to his service provider. Therefore, if those elderly people choose a care manager, they have to take his service plan in his

service provider where he belongs. That's why we make efforts to insist on making him independent. In case of construction business, a design office is independent from people who do construction. We make such manager in charge of making a care plan, separate him from service provider to establish a new organization and make new two plans A and B so that users can choose either. User can choose both care plan and service provider. This is how we can give users free choice system. However, they can't choose them in the present system. We make a proposal that the system has problem now. In case of care insurance, there is such problem in the system. One more thing that we think it strange from the beginning there is large difference in quality for this service because we human beings give it. If so, it's natural there is difference in price. However, the price of service is all the same, designated by the government. Regardless of the quality is good or bad, the price is all the same. This is strange. In the free economy or the system that there's freedom of choice, it's strange only the price is the same. Therefore, we insist that we should liberalize the service or decide the maximum and minimum price and set the price with quality in various services. Regardless of different quality, it's totally strange that the price is the same. Seen from the economic viewpoint, there is such inconsistency in the present care insurance system. This is a big problem for user. That's how we evaluate the quality of the current insurance service and price from the view point of users.

**Interviewer:** If you evaluate it as the third person, can you promote to improve service provider?

**Ms. Senoo:** For example, in case of Kobe, we focus on the providers with 20 or more users in this investigation. The number of providers was about 40. Twenty-three of them answered our research. So we can distinguish it into the two, participants and no participants. Participants have confidence to do it. We investigated those participants who raised their hands. Thirteen facilities of the total 23 providers had 100 full scores. Here we could segregate the group again. In addition, we could have necessary results for the contents, so that users could get good materials to judge them. However, as I told you, we're afraid since a care managers directly belong to the service provider, it's difficult to change care plan if users want to do so. If we don't improve this system, we have difficulty in making good use of the investigation result.

**Interviewer:** What do users think of it? Those elderly people chose the service provider according to someone's introduction before but do they try to select it based on such criteria?

**Ms. Senoo:** People who have already made care plan and decided the service provider had difficulty in taking new action. However, it has considerable effect on people who will choose it from now. We should do this survey earlier. I mean there was a shortage of information for care insurance before.

**Interviewer:** You publicize this information on the web site. How about the effect?

**Ms. Senoo:** We know many people see this site because the number of people who sees the web increase by 200 to 250 a day while we announce various kinds of information there. There are few opportunities for elderly to

check such information directly, but it's sure to be one of the information resources for their family.

**Interviewer:** Maybe the service providers are also interested in it. it's kind of a open score sheet.

**Ms. Senoo:** We say that information will be effective for a year but some providers ask us to release corrected results there because they improved bad point of 60 or 80 scores on this investigation.

**Interviewer:** Are you going to increase the number of providers?

**Mr. Senoo:** Although there are 40 facilities with 20 or more users, only a half of them raised their hand to join this research therefore we have to ask them to join it next time. The one more thing we have to do is to invest facilities with 20 or less users that is small facilities. If we don't investigate them, we don't get enough information. Therefore, we will ask both small and the rest of large service providers to join next investigation with this month(December in 2000) and will start the study in January.

**Interviewer:** How do you evaluate service providers?

**Ms. Senoo:** There are lots of complains or consultations about them in a window of administrative institutions. In addition to that, they implemented various inquiries survey. We arranged such information to make the baseline. We implement an investigation for a set of service providers, ten of care attendants and ten users and ask care attendants to fill in an inquiry. Then we make a list of the result with three rank of ◎○△. ◎ means 100 score, ○ , 70 and △, 30 and we multiply it by coefficient value to get scores.

**Interviewer:** You will increase the target for the survey. Will you use the specified evaluation item?

**Ms. Senoo:** The result of the survey is effective for a year, so we have to make an investigation in the same period of next year. In that case, we have to review evaluation criteria again. I think we have to change it. However, we found the service providers had few senses of management, incomplete paperwork and poor management.

**Interviewer:** Do you think rating system for service provider promotes good competition?

**Ms. Senoo:** For example, when we ask them whether they have a user list or not, some provider said, "Do we have to make such list?" Or we asked, "Do you have any list to see how care attendants work?" They said, "Do we have to make it?" It's natural to use such lists in general companies. Since they don't use even such things and are surprised to hear my question, I think they have poor sense of management.

### **Make specification for consumers**

**Interviewer:** I changed a topic. You've been involved in consumer's activity. Were there any big changes from the past to now?

**Ms. Senoo:** The first consumer's activity started with products and extended to service area which accounted for a large part in the world gradually. Since the service became target for consumer's problem, the activity had been weakening. It's because we can't see its difference from products. If we have clear specification, it's difficult to become the target of the activity. The content of the problem becomes specific for example, nuclear power or medical field. We have difficulty in doing the activity. Now, it's going to change largely. The target of consumer's activity is going to change to information. If we consumer's group study it clearly, we can't discuss it with companies. We've established CIS, Consumer Information System for four to five years. We also can't select such corporate information since a large volume of information flows to the downstream. We're just forced to flow with it together. If we pick up some information from consumers and go against the movement, the flow of information will be reduced in strength. Therefore, we'll give companies information from the position of consumers. If we give them inaccurate information, we have no chance against them, so we establish consumer's specification. It's a kind of proposal from user's opinion when they actually use products and service. It's a proposal for attribution from them and a big activity of making consumer's specification. No consumer's group except for us make such proposal. We also started this with products. For example, we started to make it with electric home appliance such as laundry machine. We ask each manufacturer to select the best laundry machine and use it by ourselves. Then, we implement inquiry survey for the machine to receive various opinions and thoughts among consumers. We comprehensively arrange such information and propose various things such as "Request to change part or bad point for consumers" This is how we make specification. If we check products test in case of product, we'll have data but we can't do it in case of service. When we thought about what we should do, we got an idea of using experienced information. We gather such information and find a keyword from them. In case of overseas trip, we receive them from people who have actually been there and make an article to check it by computer. If we do so, we can get a keyword. In case of the trip, we can get a keyword of safety at the top. We'll check how travelers, Foreign Ministry and relating people secure safety however there are few measures for the safety. When there was an accident in Kirghiz, a middle-aged woman who cooked there was told to go out of there to save her life but Japanese had no such information therefore spent their time in leisure. Therefore, she couldn't go out and that accident happened. I thought we could prevent it if foreign Ministry got safety information clearly and gave them. For the safety in overseas trip, we have to take enough measure. So, we found a keyword from such experienced information and surveyed travel agency with the word to check how the present condition was and made a list. We'd like all people to check the list about overseas information. In fact, we also take the same measure for the bank. We continue to make consumer's specification of products and service to clarify consumer's information and make a proposal from consumer. Japanese government appeals IT revolution, we feel doubtful it can announce real consumer's information clearly. Since experienced information accounts for a large part of

information, we're worried that it can give consumer's information easily. For example, we want to manage to get various ideas and announce information of care insurance from consumers but the times comes they have to make efforts to do activity by ourselves.

### **Trilateral agreement system construction**

**Interviewer:** You said consumer's activity changed from product to service. How about the stance of government and companies? Did it change for the ten years?

**Ms. Senoo:** The corporate stance changes so quickly but government doesn't almost change. Consumer's administration isn't managed by authority therefore it can't help following the activity. Therefore, we understand it tends to delay in theory. Government would rather be slower to take actions than companies because companies always go forward and move so quickly therefore they are so fast to change.

**Interviewer:** How do companies change?

**Ms. Senoo:** We've had Kobe Conference on Consumer Problems for about twenty years before. We made the trilateral agreement system there to promote the consumer's activity among three parties of consumer, companies and government in the world. At that time, we had a big trouble in this case. The same consumer's group complained us and companies made us fool to say that they didn't do such thing. After twenty years, it becomes natural. Since we had no resources, we can't do anything if we cooperate to have idea to gather. However, this idea was too early twenty years ago.

**Interviewer:** What made the trilateral agreement system function well?

**Ms. Senoo:** I think it's a flow of society. As I told you in the case of overlapping, we started to talk about the waste of lapping but everybody started to stop it because of the environmental issue to protect the earth. Like this case, the world is changing one after another. Therefore, government consumer and companies have to change. It is important how consumer's activity would rather take a big ride of society than get a chance. In case of care insurance, it's a turning point that measure changed to contract. How we show great sensitivity to such changes and catch it is very important. In such large social flow, we have to do consumer activity to follow it.

**Interviewer:** More companies join the Kobe meeting. Do they gradually increase or rapidly increase to join in a period?

**Ms. Senoo:** I felt it changed rapidly when I went to Kansai Economic Federation to explain the consumer activity. A year after that, people relating to Matsushita Electric Industrial increased to join there rapidly.

When I saw it, I thought they might misunderstand consumer activity. They gradually understand some activity give no harm to them. In the U.S, people think they have to do consumer activity to protect free economy. They think to understand each other to keep the free economy. Therefore, when I see corporate organization, executive in charge of consumer problem have good position. In Japan, such executive were side tracked employees. However, it is going to change a little recently. I feel companies can deepen their understanding of consumer problems. However, it changed again. They don't listen to consumer's opinion now.

**Interviewer:** Some manufactures aggressively think complaints are good information to develop new products, other adopt a backward-looking posture for them.

**Ms. Senoo:** Yes, you're right. There was a period that some companies thought complaints as information to develop new product. However, now one part of them think like that but others don't care about what we say. Such companies tend to increase now.

**Interviewer:** What is the background for it?

**Ms. Senoo:** I'm not sure. I think maybe we're in the economic recession. Since they are in the severe condition, they can't care about others. However, because of the recession, I think they have to stand on starting points to listen to what consumers say.

**Interviewer:** It might result from the fact that a sense of value diversifies.

**Ms. Senoo:** It's absolutely true. It's going to diversify since people start to buy products with sensitivity. Some companies keep good business because they deal with such diversified consumers. They make brochure or advertisement in detail based on age. Shiseido gives information for the blind or separate documents by gender. I think such companies keep good business. Many companies don't take the ride of changes of the times. They might be in the severe condition.

**Interviewer:** Some stop to take measure for diversification, others aggressively cope with it.

### Convenience store's survey as a base of community

**Ms. Senoo:** I think they have to take aggressive measure for it because we have different face each other and it's natural we have different sense of value. We sometimes don't know what to do between consumers, it's important for companies to catch such information sensitively. We also started a survey of convenience store as well as investigate care insurance. Now Seven Eleven Japan keeps good position. It's different from others

in treatment for customers, uniform and brightness of shops. I was so surprised to know there was a big difference.

**Interviewer:** When we studied a case of convenience store in our classroom, everybody had an image of “Safe’ or “Comfortable place to be relieved” although we only had an idea of “Convenience” in the conventional thought. We found that he would rather think it as service as you said.

**Ms. Senoo:** Although I might think so because of woman, for example, compared to Seven Eleven to Lawson, Seven Eleven has brighter image. It opens 24 hours. When I go there early in the morning, the staff member of Lawson look sleepy however the other treats us vigorously and brightly. I don’t know the reason but the placement of human resources functions well. In some ways, as young people think, there is gradual difference among convenient stores because the difference is so clear even if I see it. In addition, we start to investigate the shops therefore I feel it more clearly. Although only young people seem to use it, the generation of users will become older. I think it’ll be a base of local community.

**Interviewer:** The reason you focus on it is because you feel aware that it becomes new base of local community.

**Ms. Senoo:** When we actually surveyed care insurance, we found it would be very important in aging society. We thought what the base of our life was, supermarket or department store or market or something. When we put all convenience stores on the map of the whole part of Kobe, the convenience store becomes the base. Therefore, I think it’ll be a base of our life from now. The base of care insurance for the aging society is the service provider. If we think it with a doctor together, we can see a community. For example, this is an easy-to-live community for the elderly or good community with enough base of life. When we put a map together, we can see such thing. That is consumer’s information for local people that we have to do now. We have to find life information seen from the base of our life.

**Interviewer:** Do you evaluate how easy people live in local community in the convenience store’s survey?

**Ms. Senoo:** For example, if a community is changing to the aging society, convenience store places various lunch box for the elderly or it places products for the aging people in the lower shelf so that they can easily pick up. Such convenience store will be successful. If it doesn’t take any appropriate measure, it will be unsuccessful. When we see the movement of local community, how everybody lives and whether the community has good service in the base of our life and good treatment for the aging society, we’ll know how easy we can live in the community. Since we focus on our life, big objective for consumer’s activity is how easy people can live in the present community.

### **Consumer’s activity in information society**

**Interviewer:** As other big environmental changes, we can think how the Internet prevails. What do you think of the relationship between the activity and the trade or sales through the Internet?

**Ms. Senoo:** We focus on the various complaints on the Internet. To tell the truth, I criticize the IT revolution. When an automobile started to be sold, it was absolutely so convenient that everybody bought it. However, there was a problem on the road which was the most important infrastructure. If we drove on highway, we had to pay money but the street was very crowded. The number of automobile exceeded that of the road. Therefore, we were in a trouble for being overcrowded and had to pay a lot of money if we drove faster. Same as this case, if everybody starts to buy a personal computer and uses it in his life, the same problem as automobiles might happen there. I mean I'm worried whether there is enough social arrangement to flow information by personal computer or the arrangement can follow it or not. We are just in a hurry to buy machine and manufacturers make money. Then when we start to use it, we might not get information well. Some problems often occur now. For example, we couldn't use i-mode in some areas at all before. When we see such problem, I feel doubtful that the accident might result from insufficient infrastructure. I'm worried that IT revolution will be the same case of automobiles.

**Interviewer:** Do you have any impact for consumer's information through the Internet? Consumers can get a lot of information on the web. As an accident of Toshiba, a consumer complaints on the web site of the company so that everybody could see it.

**Ms. Senoo:** We also talk about it recently. As the information society becomes more advanced, it should have a rule as the society. If such rule or politeness in an old word is completely arranged or if we can't deal with such information clearly, we are misled by it. We have to educate consumers for such thing in various ways. We can say the same thing in the care insurance. If we don't know what the insurance is, we consumers can't have more information. Or if we don't study more about what contract is, we'll have negative conditions. Same as this case, we have to study more about a rule and method of what information we select and how we receive it, otherwise we'll be in a trouble.

**Interviewer:** Companies are swayed by specific claimers.

**Ms. Senoo.** Yes, it's because information is operated by them. When companies and consumers complains each other in the relationships between seller and buyer, they don't have too much trouble. However, if information of the civil right's are involved there, they can't manage the problem. Therefore this is sure to be horrible case. I know an around 40-50 year-old lady who is good at using i-mode and always goes out with it. I asked her what she became careful for. She told me she didn't see unnecessary information and only read information directly relating to her. She said that was a rule. I was so impressed to hear that. If we don't study a rule or etiquette to new society, it might be so scared that we suddenly deal with IT revolution.

**Interviewer:** If you promote consumer's activity, you would rather use information on the Internet. Otherwise, you can't do the activity.

**Ms. Senoo:** Some have to cut unnecessary thing drastically. However, what information we will cut depends on consumer's awareness. Therefore, consumer's education for such society will be more important from now.

**Interviewer:** Companies can directly connect to consumers through the Internet. However, in such way, they tend do hear a part of consumers for example, they just listen to people who are very interested in them but don't listen to the elderly people's voice.

**Ms. Senoo:** That's why we're worried that people think it good information because all of them listen to it as everybody thinks salable products as good thing in case of product. It shouldn't be like that. I feel we just repeat the same thing.

### Environmental issue

**Interviewer:** As you said, one of the biggest issues is environmental problem. Companies thought to make products because someone would buy them while consumers allowed it because they were satisfied with it. If consumers disagree on the environmental issues, we'll also become assailant to the earth. How do you arrange the environmental issue and consumer's problem in such condition?

**Ms. Senoo:** When we had a panel discussion as a theme of recycling in autumn, a German professor joined there as a panelist. I was so impressed to hear his various opinions. He said the environmental education was a cultural issue and also an issue of love. If we forget this issue and take short views, we can't give real environmental education. In order to make everybody really understand it, we have to make them feel with their body. We have to think about the issues with smell or taste. He said it as one of the basic thought. I was a little surprised to hear about the taste and smell. I thought we had to do it at such level. He also talked about the deposit system. We buy the inside of product and make everybody understand a container is manufacturers'. We don't have to think about reuse of plastic bottle or recycling but just want the inside of product. We just think manufacturers take responsible for disposing of container. When I think so, I find there is too much theory in the current environmental issue. It's easier for us to think how we would rather use the resource again than think about recycling. I felt it while we had panel discussion with him. Companies can't help thinking about the issue if they do anything in a big flow of the world. Same as this case, consumer's also can't ignore of it. Therefore, consumers just imagine we just want product and containers are manufactures'. It's easier to think that we'll recycle the resources again. If we start to think like it, we easily can understand the issue. Global warming and environmental hormone are important. There are many important issues

about the environment. However, if contents of the issue are more complicated or specific, we will have difficulty in doing action.

**Interviewer:** Companies are so interested in the issue now, which was push for consumers' activity. On the other hand, they try to have conflict with all the knowledge, so we have to have theory against it.

**Ms. Senoo:** If we do the activity, we have to have all knowledge, we can't win with theory. We have to think about what we should do from the sense of our life. I think we should start with the basic idea of recycling of the resource as consumer's environmental issue. Otherwise, we can't win the conflict if we are told difficult thing such as environmental hormone or something.

**Interviewer:** Same as the trilateral agreement system, both companies and consumers have to solve more problems of the issue. Do you have a new system for that?

**Ms. Senoo:** We don't have it yet now. However, the basic is the trilateral agreement. If we think about it, we said a great thing before because I said it twenty years ago.

**Interviewer:** Do you have anything to emphasize in the future consumer's activity?

**Ms. Senoo:** In some period, we changed a word of consumer to liver.

I don't know who changed it. However, I think we can't change it because consumer's problem is consumer's problem not liver's problem. Since the position of consumers always relates to economic activity, if we change the world issue, it'll be unclear.

### Activity of NPO

**Interviewer:** By the way, I heard you had started Kagayaki support center of NPO recently. What activity did you start concretely?

**Ms. Senoo:** We have a reason to start up NPO. We'll have 50th anniversary of Federation of Women's Organization this year. It's really difficult an organization continues to exist for 50 years. A big tree of the organization becomes older and might be less energetic than before or we don't know how the history of 50 years will be. That's why we connect a corporate organization of NPO to the incorporate Federation of Women's Organization, which might lead the main structure to grow more. Even if one of them will die down, NPO will support it. Therefore, we can develop our activity as local organization which covers the whole city of Kobe. That's why we established it. NPO is said as an objective group but I think it has to have regional

characteristics in the activity. If it has no local connection or regional characteristics, it can't have real activity or movement. Our NPO Kagayaki puts much importance on local problems of the elderly or aging welfare issue. One more important thing is child support. We local NPO should focus especially on this big issue, because there are many young residents in new estate. In addition to that, Kobe has a history for example we have sightseeing spots such as "Wadamisaki" or "Arima" and continue to tell everybody its history here. To keep historical site and history will be more important. We have activity focusing on such main three pillars. We'll keep local history and site. Even if the town change a lot, we'll keep such original thing. At the same time, we'll observe and cultivate various cultures, dance and folk stories in relating to this. This is a responsibility for local NPO. Therefore, elderly welfare, child support, @@@ local history and culture, are the basic biggest activity.

**Interviewer:** Do such activity function well?

**Ms. Senoo:** Since we have people who originally experience local activity before, we basically have a policy of preventing a quarrel in the Federation of Women's Organization or consumer's activity and cooperate each other therefore I think the activity functions well based on the policy. As I just simply talked about the policy at the beginning of this interview, but it will be very big pillar to protect local community.

#### **Consumer's activity with sense of management**

**Ms. Senoo** I've never forget this in the 50 years of the history of our association. There was a school president called Mr. Yoshimoto Kobayashi at Kobe University before. I continued to tell him that management of organization was the same as corporate management. He told me that I told a great thing and nobody said like that. Everybody misunderstands it natural all organization keep poor management therefore they don't keep good activity. He told me I was great to have such management sense. I had an opportunity to be praised by him. There has had such thought since before.

**Ms. Senoo:** I forgot to tell you one thing in the previous issue of consumer's specification. We insist consumer should have acceptable price as well as specification. For example, consumer can have a maximum limit to buy a laundry machine now. It's strange to pay more expensive money to buy it or we can say the same thing of the entrance fee for cultural activity. We have to tell acceptable price limit as consumer's price. We continue to insist on it in the consumer's specification.

**Interviewer:** You talked consumer's sense of value diversified. Does it become difficult to decide the criteria of specification or price in such condition?

**Ms. Senoo:** No, it doesn't. When we originally talked about what we targeted at in the consumer's activity

although scholars said various things, we said we didn't have to say such troublesome thing. We just pursue how much we pay from our own wallet. Consumer's problem is based on our wallet. How much we can pay is a basic thought. Then, we start to judge the price is expensive or reasonable. Therefore, we always tell everybody the basic of all things are his wallet. When we think about problems from such sense, It is natural the sense of value diversifies. If companies deal with it, they will do good business and consumers will also be good. However, since they don't do so, they'll have a loss. It's very simple story.

**Interviewer:** As you said before, you decided any criteria and analyze the reason clearly. Therefore, you can discuss with companies even if the sense diversifies and you know what you will talk about.

**Ms. Senoo:** We'll know it clearly. When we regulate something, we'll make criteria as a common rule of the activity. It's very important to make a rule if we do anything. This is the most different point from other groups.

**Interviewer:** As the conventional consumers' activity, you don't oppose everything but you try to solve problems together.

**Ms. Senoo:** This is because we have a sense of management. Everybody often says all people who do business are bad people. In case of consumer's activity, it's strange they are bad people. They also run their companies therefore I think we have an opportunity to understand each other. I had a lecture for ten years at University of Marketing and Distribution Sciences. It was great experience to study various things for me when I also had a lecture at Kobe University before. It was also good opportunity to arrange the previous trace of my consumer's activity. If I don't summarize it, I can't talk about it. I arranged the previous experience and put them in a frame. Since I could make the basic at that time, I could talk about it at the University. In some ways, I had good experience. There might be few people except for me to experience in teaching in various places. I also knew education of kindergarten because I had experienced in managing it by myself before. However, I don't have experience of teaching in an elementary school. After graduating school, I taught at junior and high school. Then, I did it at university for a while. It's very helpful to teach social and consumer's education. For example, "I see, I have to talk for children at kindergarten" or "It's more effective if I talk with dignity." something like that. There are all sorts of information for social education. If we talk about academic background or generation or regional characteristics, there are various things to talk about. Therefore, I have to change the way to talk. I have to change it so that everybody can understand it. That's why it's very helpful that I had various experiences of education.

**Interviewer:** Is there any originality of Kobe in consumer activity? Is there any difference between Kobe and Kanto areas?

**Ms. Senoo:** There is a little difference between Kanto, Eastern area of Japan and Kansai, Western area. Tokyo

would rather hold a morale-boosting. In Kansai, we're talking about a problem completely. The most interesting thing was when we had a problem of "Dentist 110". We received 700 complaints a week about dentists. In the same period, consumer group in Osaka did the same activity and received the same amount of complaints as ours there. However, the way of arranging or dealing with them was different between the both. We started to talk with Dentist Association in Kobe soon. We gave all complaints to the Association and told them to think of it. We left a matter in its hand. The group of Osaka ignored the Association and started to appeal dentists who had complaints. Therefore, they started to fight each other and didn't receive any result. We talked with the Association because they also had their face. It sorted out those complaints to two problems, dentists and patients. As a result, we did the same activity as Osaka but in our case, we made a promise of two things with the Association. The first thing was to completely give patients a receipt for all processes such as artificial teeth. The second thing was to explain whether patients could use health insurance and the price to use the insurance or not, so that they could choose the way. I think it was very meaningful for patients. If we had quarrel and didn't get anything, it was waste of time. If we can receive a receipt from dentist, we'll be relieved. Some people misunderstand to put artificial teeth with health insurance. Therefore, it's advantageous that dentists explain patients can use the insurance. We have to do such activity as to get good result.

**Interviewer:** Do other groups study the case of Kobe?

**Ms. Senoo:** They have few opportunities to do so. They often have a quarrel. Some fruits shop sell cut fruits. A consumer said, "Is there any sanitary problems to sell such fruits?" We received such complaint. So, we started to investigate it and saw a lot of bacteria on the surface of the fruits when I bought it at 3:00pm. We wanted to stop selling such products but when we thought that the elderly living alone could have various fruits if they bought it. Without it, they have to buy a whole apple and take a few days to have it or they only have specified fruits. When we thought about the convenience that they could have various fruits, we couldn't say to stop selling it @@@. Then we talked with healthcare center and the shop, as a result we decided to make them indicate the production date and time. This is because the longer time it takes, the more bacteria fruits have. If we see it, we will know whether we can have it or not. Therefore, we finished the problem to decide to indicate the time and date to cook because we couldn't tell them to stop doing it suddenly. As the result of that fruits shop did various things, someone thought it was very helpful. That's why they start to sell it like that. They have their own reason. They are exactly true. If we recognize it, we have no other ways to indicate them. Some supermarkets made a manual to sell such fruits. There is a manual about cut vegetables. It shows how to wash them and the procedure, how to cut or use them with groves. There was no manual for cut fruits before. Therefore, they place the date and time to cook. A complaint from a lady caused to solve such problem. We told some group in Tokyo and Osaka but they had no reactions for it.

**Interviewer:** It's the way of Kobe.

**Ms. Senoo:** Yes. It's a little bit different from others.

**Interviewer:** Thank you for giving us precious story today.

**[From editor]**

Ms. Senoo was a different type from other people in the consumer's activity who I met before. When I asked them an issue of Internet, they picked up bad effect for young people through the @@@ Internet sites or asked them an issue of large shopping center they said junior or high school student became delinquent or stole products there. I think those issues were sure to be important but not an essence of problem in consumer's consumption and purchase. Ms. Senoo emphasized to think about consumer's problem as an issue of choice in the market. If there isn't enough information to choose information, the group provides data. If a seller prevents consumer's appropriate choice, the group clarifies the problem and corrects his action. I mean it insists on thinking problem in the way of thinking. This way of thinking will be effective for companies, government or researcher to think about consumer's problem theoretically. It also leads to clarify a focus point in a discussion with companies and government and prevent parallel discussion. The environmental changes by consumer's activity affects on the way of consumer's activity. The first reason is that consumer's sense of value diversified. If consumers seek for various satisfactions, it might be difficult to get consensus of the activity among them. The second reason is people's interests in consumption shift from products to service according to an increase of business to sell service. Compared to products, since people have different quality of service, it's difficult to see the level of quality before purchasing products or from outside and measure it subsequently. Therefore, it has a feature to difficult to see or check quality for consumer's activity. The third reason is consumers use the Internet. People think optimistically the difference of information between companies and consumers becomes smaller in the Internet society. On the other hand, the ability to send or gather information among consumers become larger therefore companies have a channel to exchange information directly and efficiently with consumers, so it might be risky that consumers have few opportunity to tell their opinions as a group. The fourth reason is that an increase of interests in global environment issue also affects on consumer's activity. This is because the structure of companies of assailant and consumers of victim will change to new structure with a concept both are assailant to the environmental issue, which causes to make consumer's problem and consensus more complicated. However, even in such difficult condition like her and the Consumers Association of Kobe, the stance to think the consumer's problem with an issue of the market is more important. This is because they continue to provide a theory that the basic relationship between consumers and companies in the market don't change even if the environment changes.