

## THE POWER OF THE BOTTLE

Huge billboards appear each month in train stations. They show ferris wheels and wheat fields and flowers and trees and—in each poster, placed amid the quaint, unspoiled splendor—a single bottle of iichiko. It's easy to imagine weary Japanese commuters, pressed chest to chest, peering out at a bewildering array of ads, searching for that familiar bottle, dreaming perhaps of a simpler time. □ This successful campaign, now in its 14th year, is the brainchild of designer Hideya Kawakita. His company, Japan BELIER Art Center, in Tokyo, produces 700 posters for the liquor, puts them up around train and subway stations nationwide, and then supplements them with limited magazine and TV advertising. □ But Kawakita does more than just art direct the iichiko campaign. He also oversees production of Japanese and English-language publications on culture for the manufacturer, and heads a loosely organized think-tank called the



21st Century Conference. Iichiko today is the largest-selling brand of shochu in Japan, accounting for 25 percent of the market. (Shochu is a fruity liquor, made from either rice, potatoes, or buckwheat.) Many credit both the advertising campaign by Kawakita, and the sound strategic advice he provides the manufacturer, Sawna Shurui. In fact the company and the designer have a special relationship forged by two factors Japanese place a great deal of importance on—hometowns and relatives. As a teenager, Kawakita made an unusual move from Kurume to Usa City, where Sanwa Shurui is located. There, in the Kyushu island town of 60,000, he spent his latter high school years living with his older sister while his mother was ill. Kawakita's sister and her husband both happened to work at Sanwa, then a tiny wine and sake distiller employing a mere handful of people. After graduating from the Tokyo University of the Arts in 1972, Kawakita quickly made his name with the first simple and comprehensive map of the Tokyo subway system. He went on to create a series of witty posters for the Teito Rapid Transit Authority designed to

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improve the commuting manners of the populace. When Sanwa decided years later it needed to advertise, the company (now with just 10 employees) turned to its old family friend. This vital personal connection, known in Japan as “kone,” helped create a marketing miracle. “Sanwa was a very small company,” Kawakita says. “I was a pretty well-known designer, so they came to me for advice. And when I visited my hometown, I’d go see the people at Sanwa.”

Iichiko was first introduced in 1979 as “The Downtown Napoleon” and, in the midst of a national shochu boom, posted sales of \$3.3 million, a decent showing for the company, but a

down for a good hearty drunk. People were actually drinking it now for the taste, free of negative images. When Takara introduced Can Chu-Hi, a shochu and soda combo sold in a variety of fruity flavors, shochu suddenly became trendy—a potential short-term boon for distillers, but ultimately a trap. So the challenge, as Kawakita saw it, was to prepare iichiko for a time in the not-so-distant future when shochu wasn’t quite as fashionable or hip.

Meanwhile, annual sales of iichiko climbed to \$17.5 million, and a crucial decision had to be made: build a new plant, produce more iichiko, and become a national brand? Or remain



number that represented a mere fraction of the total market. The advertising budget was zero. Sanwa hired Kawakita in 1983. He immediately conducted a full analysis of the brand and realized that his first goal would be to make sure that Sanwa didn’t go bust when the shochu bubble inevitably burst. “Other manufacturers were confusing the issues,” Kawakita recalls. They were either pitching to the fickle youth market (not the traditional one for shochu), or limiting its image to a very Japanese corner, using corny ballads and folksy entertainers.

Kawakita saw the mistake of both strategies. Thanks to a popular brand at the time, Takara’s Jun, gone was the post-war image of shochu as a laborer’s white liquor best watered

local? Based on market research conducted in Tokyo and Osaka, Kawakita encouraged the company to expand. The research showed that iichiko drinkers were well-off, well-educated, but in debt. In their 40’s, they had kids in school and mortgages. They liked to drink, but wouldn’t drink just anything. These men, with annual incomes of about \$60,000, read the *Nikkei Shimbun* (Japan’s *Wall Street Journal*) and worked in relatively free-thinking occupations: architecture, design, research. Kawakita’s initial strategy was, he says, “to take care of the market iichiko already had—and forget the youth market. The existing customers could tell people in their 20’s they ought to try iichiko.”

(PAGE 21) ONE OF KAWAKITA’S EARLY IICHIKO ADS, IN 1985, WITH BOTTLE AS MUSEUM PIECE. ■ (ABOVE) A 1996 AD EVOKING FAMILIAR IDYLIC THEMES.

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The campaign was simple and fairly inexpensive: large b-size posters in 700 locations around the country, each one near or in a train or subway station, each one up for just one week of every month. But why put money into a low-return medium like posters? Kawakita wanted to build brand identity through repetition, while buying time for Sanwa—the new plant was under construction, and existing production capabilities weren't prepared for huge orders from Tokyo. Kawakita's creative concept tapped into the deep ambivalence his (captive) audience felt about modern Japan. These

to fizzle and the results of his unorthodox campaign began to emerge. Sales of every other shochu manufacturer slid. Only iichiko prospered and grew. At the same time it hired Kawakita, Sanwa shrewdly entrusted national distribution to a single company, Nihon Shurui, hoping that move would inspire the distributor to give the job its all. (Other distillers spread the business around.) By 1989 iichiko had captured one-quarter of the shochu market; two years later Sanwa had annual sales of \$219 million, \$46 million in profits, and an advertising budget of \$13.7 million. The company's ratio of



people had grown up watching the post-war economy tread the life out of the old, agrarian ways. So when they got off the crowded subway after 14 hours at the office, they may well have been thinking exactly what Kawakita's posters seemed to be saying: the modern world is fast losing its appeal! Is the Japanese economic miracle worth this? The images combine affection and loss, but what's represented is the charm of the disappearing scenes and customs, not the loss. Looking at a popular iichiko poster, Kawakita says, "This is a typically Japanese scene, but there are no scenes like this left in Japan. This is Saint Moritz, but it's also Japan to the Japanese." In 1985, just as Kawakita predicted, the shochu craze started

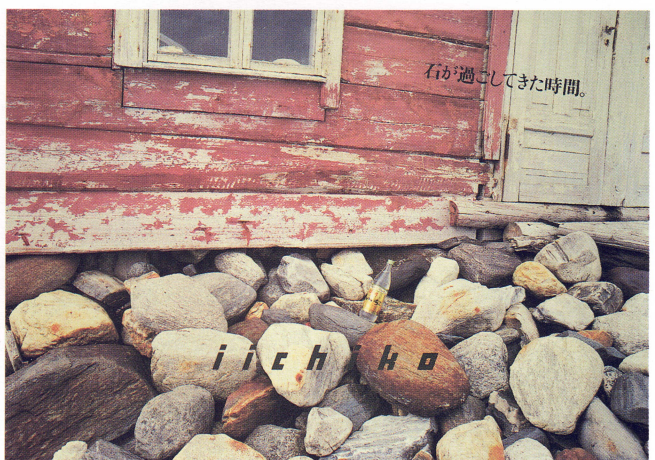
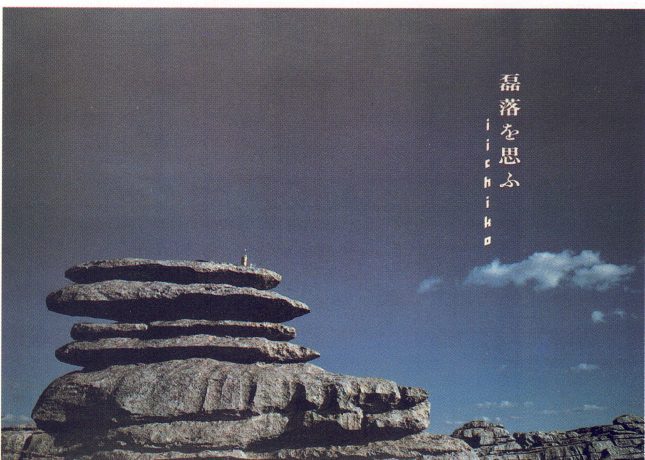
reoccurring profits to fixed assets was an astounding 108 percent. (Large food manufacturers are typically around 10 percent.) Last year the company grew to 250 employees, with annual sales of over \$300 million and an advertising budget of \$15.5 million, 25 percent of which was spent on posters, still the most cost effective aspect of the campaign. As the main brain for iichiko, Kawakita enjoys a remarkable amount of creative freedom. "The connection was definitely a plus," he says of the relationship. "But the good results I was able to show them are what keeps them listening to me." In 1996 Kawakita released two hardcover collections of iichiko posters. The books include brief essays on facing pages, and

(ABOVE) ONE OF A SERIES OF KAWAKITA'S 1986 ADS DRAWING ON THE THEME OF LIQUID REFRESHMENT. ■ (OPPOSITE) VIEWS OF NATURE AND

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in the back a chart of dates, shooting locations, papers and inks. His company also produces a Japanese-language magazine on culture and design called *iichiko*, along with the English-language version, *iichiko intercultural*. This free aca-

ing conferences in Tokyo, which involve top Sanwa management and guest speakers. Officially called the 21st Century Conference (Kawakita simply calls it the *iichiko* conference), these monthly meetings deal with management, design, and



demic journal—sent to research facilities, universities, and large bookstores in Japan—is not corporate vanity production filled with *iichiko* ads, but a serious cultural magazine with contributions from leading artists and writers. Kawakita is also preparing his client for the future by organiz-

ing the issues confronting business as they move into the next century. "I feel responsible for helping the company choose its successors," says the fifty-year-old designer. "So I felt like I had to put out a proper publication and, through the conferences, investigate well-grounded design." ■

RECREATION: (TOP LEFT) 1989. (RIGHT) 1994. (MIDDLE LEFT) 1988. (RIGHT) 1991. (BOTTOM LEFT) 1996. (RIGHT) CHRISTMAS, 1996.