Convenience Stores Are Changing Lifestyles in Japan

Tachibana Miya and
Takeda Miho
Synchronized Swimmers
No. 19, 2001 Contents

Special Feature

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Special Feature*

Convenience Stores Are Changing Lifestyles in Japan

If you come across a brightly lit store late at night in one of Japan’s shopping or residential districts, it’s probably a convenience store. First seen in the United States, convenience stores evolved in new ways in Japan, developing advanced business techniques and innovative services. Many are open day and night. They are changing consumer habits, and always coming up with new ideas to meet the needs of today’s lifestyles.
Convenience stores first developed in the United States. Although they are much smaller than a supermarket, they sell many daily necessities, from food and magazines to stationery and clothing.

The stores were first seen in Japan in 1969, in the heyday of economic growth. They became popular because of the advantages they offered: a wide selection of goods, and excellent hours—from 7 a.m. to 11 p.m., every day of the year. And as lifestyles changed, the stores changed too, with many of them now operating 24 hours a day. So it is not surprising that convenience stores have spread throughout the country.

Most convenience stores in Japan follow the franchise system adopted in the United States. As part of a franchise chain, stores pay membership charges and fees to the franchisor which, in return, distributes products to the stores, sets service guidelines, and so on. In Japan today, almost 60 franchise chains control more than 38,000 convenience stores nationwide. (In addition to these, there are about 12,000 non-franchise convenience stores.) In places where the stores are fairly close to one another, you can walk past three or four of them in just a few minutes.

How can we explain this phenomenal growth? One important factor is the Point of Sales (POS) system, first introduced to Japanese convenience store chains in 1982. The POS system helps stores manage sales-related information. Some of this information, such as the price and the product code, is obtained from the bar code printed on each product, which a special device reads at the cash register. Other information is recorded at the same time, including the approximate age of the customer buying the product. In this way, the chain gathers information on individual store operations, learning which type of people buy which products, how many they buy, and when they buy them.

Information from the POS system tells franchise chain headquarters which products are selling well, and which are not, at each store. Only products that are selling well are ordered for individual stores. This process of elimination continues until each store ends up displaying plenty of items, but only items that typically sell well in that store. The POS data also tells chain headquarters how many items are generally bought at certain times of the day at specific stores, and this makes for an efficient delivery system. Headquarters knows how many and what type of goods to deliver—for example, packaged meals every day at 6 a.m., 11 a.m., and 4 p.m.; beverages six times a week; and confectioneries and frozen foods three times a week. As a result, customers can be almost certain that the neighborhood store will have what they want, when they want it. And since the POS system provides specific, up-to-date information, stores can stock items that are currently in demand in their own locality.

Many convenience stores in Japan have a retail floor area of only about 100 m², limiting them to a maximum of about 3,000 types of products. Even so, a local convenience store is generally able to sell what we need for daily living. The stores are, true to their name, convenient.

Because Japanese convenience stores use advanced technical systems like POS, they stock what people want, and this explains why sales revenues and store numbers are rising. For consumers in Japan, convenience stores are becoming an essential part of their daily lives.
A Mini History of Convenience Stores in Japan

Japan’s first convenience store opened a little more than 30 years ago. The nation’s economy has experienced ups and downs since then, but convenience stores have kept growing. These pages look at how the store chains have used creativity and ingenuity to grow so strong that they are now spreading to other countries.

Written by Takahashi Koki, Photos by Kono Toshikiko, Other photo credits: Seven-Eleven Japan Co., Ltd.

The first convenience store in the United States began operations more than 70 years ago. The first one in Japan appeared in 1969. In 1974, a large Japanese retailer, Ito-Yokado Co., Ltd., joined forces with the Southland Corporation of the United States to launch the first Seven-Eleven store in Japan. Since then, convenience stores have opened one after the other throughout the country—there were about 10,000 in 1980 and over 20,000 in 1992. Today, the franchise chains alone operate more than 38,000 outlets.

But before convenience stores could achieve this phenomenal success in Japan, they had to introduce management practices from the U.S. and invent their own business techniques. Two major reasons that their position in Japan’s retail market is so strong today are their innovative products and unique distribution system. For example, the stores developed their own recipes for two traditional foods, o-nigiri (rice balls) and o-den (simmered foods). Employing a comprehensive, highly adaptable sales system, they began delivering refrigerated packaged meals and other food products to stores several times a day. In addition, the Point of Sales (POS) system, first introduced by Seven-Eleven in 1982, gives stores hands-on control over inventory, product ordering and deliveries.

The wave of store openings reached its peak in the second half of the 1980s. This was also a time of intense competition among chains. Many of them worked hard to establish a dominant presence in certain areas, in a bid to raise delivery efficiency and attain greater visibility among local consumers.

Japan’s speculative economy faltered and the “bubble” burst in the early 1990s, pushing the nation into recession. Even so, new convenience stores kept opening up, and the industry is still growing. The stores are able to respond to shoppers’ demands for convenience, and continue to change consumer habits in Japan.

The convenience store chains are not limiting their activities to Japan. They began investing overseas around the end of the 1980s, with FamilyMart opening up stores in Taiwan and Seven-Eleven Japan penetrating the Hawaiian market. Convenience stores began in the United States and developed in new ways in Japan, and the Japanese model is now spreading to other countries. Techniques honed over a period of 30 years—for example, establishing a dominant presence in certain areas, and using distribution and inventory management systems that pay close attention to detail—are now succeeding in other countries as well.

Today, there are more than 1,000 FamilyMart stores in Taiwan, and o-nigiri rice balls packaged the convenience-store way are becoming a popular light meal in the Republic of Korea. In a recent development, FamilyMart announced in August 2001 that it would begin expanding into China in three years.
Chronology of Convenience Store Development in Japan

1969
- My Shop, Japan's first convenience store, makes its debut.

1974
- The first Seven-Eleven store opens, in Koto Ward, Tokyo.

1975
- Seven-Eleven outlet in Koriyama, Fukushima Prefecture, becomes the first convenience store in Japan to remain open 24 hours a day.

1978
- Stores begin twice-daily deliveries of packaged meals and ready-to-eat side dishes.
- More stores begin operating 24 hours a day.
- Stores begin selling rice balls wrapped in cellophane.

1981
- Food processing and manufacturing companies begin working with convenience stores to develop new products.
- Seven-Eleven begins using the Point of Sales (POS) system.
- Stores begin acting as courier agents and offering photocopying services.
- Lawson begins selling o-den (simmered foods).

1982
- Number of new convenience stores rises dramatically (Seven-Eleven has 2,600 stores, Lawson has about 2,000).

1985
- Black Monday stock market slump.
- Stores begin handling telephone and utility bill payments.
- By this time, many stores offer fax services, serve as agents for motor vehicle liability insurance, and handle payments for mail-order companies.
- Stores begin 3-times-a-day deliveries of packaged meals and ready-to-eat side dishes.
- Seven-Eleven-Japan purchases Hawaiian operations of the Southland Corporation of the U.S.

1987
- Japan's "bubble" economy begins to collapse.

1989
- Outbreak of Gulf War.

1990
- Seven-Eleven-Japan purchases a majority interest in Southland Corporation, and acquires management rights in the company.
- More than 20,000 convenience stores in Japan.

1992
- The Great Hanshin/Awaji Earthquake occurs.

1995
- Convenience stores begin selling video games.
- More than 30,000 convenience stores in Japan.

1999
- E-net, a partnership offering automated teller machine (ATM) services, is established. The major participants are: FamilyMart, Circle K, SUNKUS, Three F, and MINISTOP. This leads to the installation of ATMs in many stores.
- Seven-Eleven begins joint development of basic cosmetics with DHC, a skincare product company.

2000
- Stores begin e-commerce services and door-to-door delivery of goods purchased online.
- They also begin delivery of prepared meals.
- Seven-Eleven begins installing ATMs in its stores.

2001
- FamilyMart announces its intention to open 3,000 stores in China.
Convenience stores keep becoming more, well, convenient. Their influence over Japanese lifestyles continues to grow. They have spread throughout the country. Why is their appeal so strong? This article looks at how convenience stores are influencing consumer lifestyles in Japan.

Written by Yamane Kazuma, non-fiction writer
Photo by Sakai Nobushiko

"Conbini" is the Japanese word for convenience stores like Seven-Eleven. I counted 12 conbini in my neighborhood within a radius of 500 meters from the railway station. It is true that I live in a densely populated residential area of Tokyo, but 12 seems like a lot, especially since there are so many other retail outlets nearby—more than 100 small specialty shops on six or seven busy streets around the station, and three large supermarkets.

In 1927, a small store in Dallas, Texas, developed a new and convenient way to sell food products and everyday items. This, we are told, was the beginning of the convenience store. In Japan, the first convenience store is said to have opened in 1969, and the first American-style Seven-Eleven began operations in 1974. Since then, large supermarkets and corporations have invested in the conbini industry, one after the other. In the spring of 2001, Japanese franchise chains alone operated about 38,000 convenience stores, and annual revenues totaled more than 6.7 trillion yen.

This means that in Japan, on average, there is one convenience store for every 3,400 people, and per capita spending in them is more than 50,000 yen per year.

One reason for this phenomenal performance is the Point of Sales (POS) system. The system works like this. Computer networks link cash registers in stores to the franchise headquarters. The cash registers have push-keys to record customer gender and age group—for example, middle-aged man, student, or elderly lady. When a customer buys something, the clerk punches the relevant key. In this way, customer data is correlated with the product and price information obtained from the bar codes of the items purchased. Customer and sales data is transmitted from each store to headquarters, where it is stored and analyzed in real time. This makes it possible to: (1) fine-tune each store’s delivery schedule; (2) identify with precision which products are selling well at a specific store, then adjust its inventory of about 3,000 commodities to concentrate on those products; and (3) develop new products that, hopefully, will sell well.

This results in stores that are more compact yet even more efficient than convenience stores in the United States. Japanese conbini go through a process of elimination until they are offering an excellent selection of products that are in demand locally, while using shelf space efficiently. They are small stores, but now play an important role in Japan’s consumer society.

About 75% of the revenues of a conbini come from food products, and half of these are fast foods, side dishes, fresh confectionaries and the like, all delivered on a daily basis. Both fast food restaurants and conbini sell ready-to-eat food, but we don’t eat in the convenience store, of course—we take the food home or to work, and eat it there.

Take-out meals called bento are packaged in small boxes. They typically contain rice and different servings of food. One popular “fast food” is o-nigiri, rice pressed into a ball the size of a fist, with fish, meat, pickles or other ingredients inside—a Japanese-style “sandwich.”

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Since ancient times, *o-nigiri* have been a take-it-with-you lunch, and now convenience store chains are producing them in large quantities.

These take-out foods are popular as a simple lunch or supper. Two reasons why they sell so well: you don't have to bother cooking a meal, and they are cheap (300 to 500 yen). People living alone in the city are certainly glad to eat them, and this sentiment is growing among elderly people, who are living alone in increasing numbers. No wonder they choose the take-out way—it's a lot easier and cheaper to buy ready-to-eat food than to buy all of a meal's ingredients and cook for one person.

I think one reason that *conbini* are well patronized in shopping and residential districts is that we Japanese have never had the custom of stocking lots of food at home. We generally buy just enough food for one day at a time, except for items that keep well, like rice and seasonings. After all, the sea around our islands offers a daily supply of fresh fish, and farmers send vegetables and other produce to market on a regular basis. On outlying islands, people often shop every morning for food for breakfast, and in rural towns you might see a morning market. In the United States and other countries it is common to buy a week's supply of groceries at a large supermarket, but we Japanese wouldn't want to do that. *Conbini* sell fresh food for the home, and this has spurred their growth.

Attracting customers with fresh produce delivered several times a day has a down side—making so many small deliveries wastes energy. Another problem is the fatty, nutritionally unbalanced diet that results if we depend too much on ready-to-eat *conbini* meals. We cannot ignore the adverse health effect this can have, especially on the young.

One more challenge for *conbini* is to find ways to develop a more personal relationship with their customers, the type of relationship small "mom-and-pop" neighborhood stores cultivated to maintain a strong customer base.
Convenience Stores Are Changing Lifestyles in Japan

The Evolving Convenience Store

Convenience stores in Japan are changing rapidly. They have always been convenient, selling all kinds of products, and now they are evolving into centers for the local community, offering all kinds of services. When consumers begin calling for a new service, there's a good chance convenience stores are getting ready to offer it.

Written by Takahashi Hidemine, Photo credits: Seven-Eleven Japan, am/pm

If there's a convenience store nearby, what's there to worry about? That's what young Japanese people say. And maybe they are right—the stores keep on introducing new services every year, becoming so convenient that they are changing consumer habits in Japan.

One example is the touch screen monitors installed in many stores. Just touch the screen with your finger to reserve a hotel room and order all kinds of things, from concert tickets to airline tickets. In some stores you can touch in your order of CDs, videos, books, even a computer. Or use the monitor to look for a job in the online classified ads.

One chain, Lawson, offers a convenient health diagnosis kit. Press on the screen to order the kit, and it'll be delivered to you. Use the kit to take your own urine and blood samples, send them to the lab, and the results will be delivered to you soon.

Paying a telephone or utility bill at a convenience store is a snap, of course. Today many stores even have an automated teller machine (ATM), so you don't have to go to the bank to find out how much is in your account, or to deposit, withdraw or transfer funds. You can even borrow cash from some of the ATMs.

Another chain, Seven-Eleven, offers online shopping. Use your home computer to go to 7dream.com, and then choose from among approximately 800,000 products. The order will be delivered to the local store, and you can pick up the parcel whenever you wish. Before we had to wait at home when something was going to be delivered, but those days are gone now.

Convenience stores are leading the way in the online shopping industry. A spokeswoman for the am/pm chain, Kawashima Noriko, says, "The basic goal of our stores is to satisfy customers. Perhaps the most important feature of convenience stores in Japan is their willingness to listen to customers and adapt accordingly."

Stores in the am/pm chain are located mainly in the Tokyo region. The franchise has launched a cellular phone recharging service in response to demand from
businesspeople in the busy metropolis. They charge their phones in special coin lockers (100 yen for 10 minutes), and shop or go about their business while they're charging.

Another innovation from the chain is a consumer support service that tells you who to ask for guidance or help in getting a particular task done. If you telephone the service, a company that can help you will phone back the next day or soon after. Do you need a good babysitter? A reputable real estate agent? A bug exterminator? Someone to take away an unwanted electrical appliance? A funeral home? It's hard to think of a business that can't help you via the convenience store's support service.

How about meal deliveries? The Seven-Eleven chain started them in September 2000. Any of about 300 different types of meals will be delivered to your home or office if you place an order one day or more in advance. Or you can pick up the meal at the store. Another option is to order all of the ingredients for a meal you cook yourself—specify how many servings you need, so there's no waste. This is ideal for elderly people who can't shop for themselves, and for working couples on the go. More than 24,000 people are now registered for these services.

In this way, convenience stores are evolving into centers that support different consumer lifestyles. Kawashima says, "Convenience stores are now an important part of our lives, so it's natural that people expect them to be more socially conscious. For example, we have to think about ways to protect the environment."

To reduce the amount of food thrown away, am/pm freezes prepared meals and thaws out only portions that are on order. The stores also collect food waste for composting, then send the compost to farmers who have agreed to use it. Stores belonging to the am/pm chain in Tokyo's 23 wards now recycle 85% of their waste.

Convenience stores are evolving in directions set by their customers. By examining this astonishing evolution, we see how consumer demand has changed in Japan over the years. ☛
Convenience Stores Take Off in New Directions

Convenience stores have been serving customers in Japan for about 30 years now. What do consumers expect of a convenience store? Here are two stores that are exploring new concepts, hoping to rise above their rivals in this highly competitive age.

Written by Takahashi Hidenine, Photos by Akagi Kachi

SCOCO—A Convenience Store Developed by Women for Women

Why not a convenience store for women? That was the idea behind SCOCO, which opened in May 2001 in Nagoya, Aichi Prefecture. The staff, 100% women, developed the original concept and saw it through the planning stages.

The store’s restroom is called a “powder room.” It has a big mirror for a customer to touch up her makeup. Part of the floor is raised, to create a clean space for her to kick off her shoes and change her stockings and clothes. Drinking glasses are available as an aid to brushing teeth, and there are absorbent papers to remove oil from the skin. SCOCO certainly is a convenience store for women.

The take-out meals sold here are inexpensive, and they come in small packages. You might think they are for someone on a diet, but no—“They are for discerning women who want a bit of this and a bit of that for a nice meal,” says Nakamura Misako, who works in the product department at COCO Store Co., Ltd. Customers choose the size that suits them, perhaps a small serving of pork on rice, bread, salad and a dessert. So a take-out meal costs the same as at an ordinary convenience store, but with all this variety, it’s a small feast.

The cosmetics on the shelves show a refined awareness of current trends and seasonal influences. In the winter there’s an array of lipsticks to prevent chapped lips, in the summer some hair clips to pin the hair up. You’ll also see a number of fashionable net tights. Nakamura tells me, “After work, some customers drop in, change their clothes, then go out to enjoy themselves. Many of our products are the types of things I always wanted a convenience store to have, so I’m sure we are offering women what they want.”

The store even has a nook called the Eat In Café. There are 14 chairs here, inviting women to sit down and chat.

1. This original store concept was the inspiration of Nakamura Misako. Her university graduation thesis was based on her research on convenience stores.
2. Part of the floor in the powder room is raised, so women can keep their feet clean when they change their pantyhose.
3. The Eat In Café has floor baskets for your coat and things you’ve been carrying.
4. An example of SCOCO’s popular don-buri (rice with topping in a bowl). It is called “petit-don” because the servings are rather small.
Natural Lawson for the Health Conscious

These days, the Japanese are thinking more about their health. This is especially true when it comes to food—more people are choosing food products and ingredients that are good for them.

As part of this movement for better health, a convenience store called Natural Lawson is promoting better eating habits. Some of the shelves are packed with vegetables grown with lower levels of agricultural chemicals than you would see elsewhere.

Shodo Yuka manages the store, which is located in Meguro, Tokyo. “Our vegetables are grown in Chiba, a prefecture next to the Tokyo metropolis. They are really fresh, because they are delivered directly from the farm to us the day after the harvest.”

Pamphlets displayed at the entrance explain how to choose the right foods for better health—for example, food to help people cope with diabetes or reduce blood pressure. Notes attached to the shelves list the ingredients and beneficial effects of some of the products displayed there. Next to items containing blueberries is a note, “For eye fatigue,” and next to the figs, “Aids digestion.” If you’re worried about your health, you may find this helpful.

Have you been putting on weight lately? Try the low-calorie soup with four types of vegetables. The rice balls and take-out meals are made with brown instead of white rice, for people who want more vitamins, minerals and fiber. Shodo says, “Many of today’s illnesses are said to be caused by food which is too refined, too rich. In the old days the Japanese ate brown rice and plenty of miso (bean paste) soup and vegetables, and people are now realizing the health benefits of such a diet.”

Convenience stores offer easy shopping and convenient services, but this one has a philosophy behind it, too. Sometimes staff members give customers advice on eating well. It’s a new type of store helping people in their search for better health, and many customers come from a considerable distance just to shop there.
A New Center for Local Communities

Japanese convenience stores are truly convenient—you’ll find them all over the place, and many of them are open 24-7. Local communities are looking at ways to make them even more convenient. The stores are assuming new roles and providing new services, becoming an integral part of their neighborhoods.

Written by Torikai Shin-chi, Photos by Kono Toshihiko

Stores as a Haven for Children

There have been several terrible crimes against children in Japan recently, so local governments are taking steps to protect them and stop crime before it happens.

One of these measures has been to designate certain places in the community, mainly homes and stores, as havens where children can run and find protection from crime or emergency situations. These havens are given names like “Kangaroo Pouch” and “110 for Child Safety” (110 is the emergency phone number in Japan). A convenience store can be an ideal haven, because someone is always on duty there.

As part of this campaign, the Convenience Store Crime Prevention Council of Ibaraki Prefecture designated affiliated stores as havens for children, and coordinated its efforts with Ibaraki police headquarters. The Council was established by all convenience stores in the prefecture.

The Council printed stickers saying “110—Safe Store for Children and Women,” and had them posted at the front of all affiliated convenience stores, starting on August 1, 2001. The stores have long been an integral part of local communities, and now they are expanding their role further.

Making Living Alone Easier for the Not-So-Young

A convenience store is almost ideal for people who live alone. This is particularly true in the case of older adults. I talked with one of them, Nishimura Kazuya, a company employee in Koganei City in the metropolis of Tokyo.

“Now that I’m pushing 60 I don’t eat out much—I usually eat at home, taking it easy in front of the TV. I often buy ready-to-eat meals from a convenience store because it’s open no matter what time I come home. You see, I don’t cook for myself.”

Convenience stores also sell salad, cooked side dishes and other prepared food, all just the right size for one person. Nishimura likes this “because there’s no waste.”

The stores are now going one step further by launching door-to-door delivery services. About a third of all am/pm convenience stores deliver food. Another chain, Seven-Eleven, delivers in Tokyo and some neighboring prefectures. In Itabashi, one ward in the Tokyo metropolis, FamilyMart delivers prepared meals and essential items to older adults who live alone, especially elderly people who can no longer shop for themselves.
Municipal Services at the Store Counter

In Japan, a resident certificate is sometimes needed for official purposes. The city of Ichikawa revolutionized one of its services when it began issuing and delivering the certificates to neighborhood convenience stores in April 1997. Residents just phone the municipal office to request a certificate, and then pick it up on the way home from work, when it’s convenient for them. Ichikawa is in Chiba Prefecture and borders the Tokyo metropolis.

Work or school commitments prevent some residents from visiting a municipal office during regular hours. So city officials looked long and hard at how they could offer some services any time of the day or night, and came up with a solution involving convenience stores. They decided to begin with resident certificates, and asked stores in the city to participate in the project. Lawson and Daily YAMAZAKI agreed.

The city took another step in April 2000, when it installed computer terminals in Lawson stores to permit access to information and some municipal services. As one example, you can now use a terminal in a Lawson store anywhere in Japan to reserve space in one of Ichikawa’s community centers.

Convenience Extends to the Physically Challenged

All kinds of people pass through the doors of a convenience store every day, and not all of them come just to shop. For many years, Watanabe Keiji has called for greater autonomy for people with disabilities. He lives in Hachioji, a city in the metropolis of Tokyo.

“Convenience stores are a big help for the physically challenged. For example, goods are delivered on pushcarts and hand trucks, so there are no steps at the entrance—that is a big help for us in wheelchairs. I like FamilyMart best, because all of their stores have automatic doors.”

The stores are always open, which gives an extra sense of security. If Watanabe comes home late and his caregiver is away, he stops off at a convenience store and asks a customer for help. “Nobody ever refuses. They all gladly go with me to open the door to my house, and even help me get into bed. So you see I live at my own pace, even without my caregiver.”
Japan's convenience store industry brings in annual revenues of more than 6 trillion yen. What is this huge market like? This page shows statistics and details to give you an inside look at the industry.

Sources: Results of a statistical survey conducted by the Japan Franchise Association, fiscal 2000; data from Seven-Eleven Japan Co., Ltd., and FamilyMart Co., Ltd.; websites of convenience store companies.

Number of convenience store chains......58 (as of March 31, 2001) *
Total annual revenues......6,709,200,000,000 yen *
Total number of stores......38,274 (as of March 31, 2001) *
Seven-Eleven ______ 8,602
Lawson ______ 7,663
FamilyMart ______ 5,773
SUNKUS ______ 2,839
Circles K ______ 2,465
am/pm ______ 1,200
MINISTOP ______ 1,547
(SUNKUS and Circle K merged in September 2000)
Average annual revenue per store......175,290,000 yen *
Average daily revenue per store......480,246 yen *
* Data for franchise chain stores only.

Number of items handled by a typical convenience store......approx. 2,600 to 3,000

A Day in the Life of a Convenience Store

6:00 a.m. Morning deliveries (packaged meals, milk, etc.). Staff stock shelves and discard packaged meals whose shelf life has expired.
6:00 a.m. Store manager arrives, checks the night's receipts, etc.
7:00 a.m. Clerks A and B finish the night shift. Store manager and clerk C take their places.
8:00 a.m. Clerk D arrives for work. Manager checks inventory and sales, then places orders.
9:00 a.m. Clerk E arrives for work. Mananger checks inventory and sales, then places orders.

A Day in the Life of a Convenience Store

Seven-Eleven's Annual Revenues and Number of Stores in Japan

A convenience store is typically operated by a manager and his or her family member(s), and staffed by five or six part-time clerks who generally work in six-hour shifts.