

Doing Business in Japan the JMEC Way

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JMEC participants and project clients, representatives of embassies, of foreign chambers in Japan and well-known figures from the Tokyo business community at large, altogether nearly 200 people, waited in anticipation for the announcement of the winners of the 17th Japan Market Expansion Competition (JMEC) (program year 2010/2011) at the annual Awards Ceremony, which took place on June 10, 2011 at the Tokyo American Club.

What started as a small operation by the Australia & New Zealand Chamber of Commerce in Japan to help foreign companies enter the Japanese market is now one of Tokyo's best-kept secrets for supporting foreign organizations' business entry and expansion in Japan and for fostering the career development of foreign and Japanese young business professionals in and around Tokyo.

What is JMEC?

Put aspiring executives and entrepreneurs from different countries and a range of business backgrounds into small competitive teams, give them real business problems in the Japanese market to consult on, and what you will get are creative and well-researched solutions presented in professional business plans that cost a fraction of the



Happy faces of the members of the first place team—a brand-new HP laptop is theirs. Project client: Sumitomo 3M Ltd. L to R: Marc Nyhan, Asami Okusawa, Mary Fidler, Kyoko Mikami, Soichi Koshikawa.

market price. This is the proposition that the Japan Market Expansion Competition (JMEC) has been offering for 17 years.

The seven-month JMEC training starts in November each year and consists of lectures and workshops followed by a teamwork phase when participants (about 60 every year) are put in teams to research and write a professional business plan for an assigned JMEC project client (typically 10 each program year). The document is submitted to both the project client and the JMEC judges at the end of April, and this is followed by oral presentations to both audiences.

The judges then determine the winners of the competition, who are announced at the annual Awards Ceremony at the beginning of June.

The participants

JMEC participants are among the most international and high-caliber in Tokyo. Since its inauguration in 1993, 848 participants from 45 countries have gone through the program. They have produced 159 business plans for JMEC project clients. In the 2010/2011 program year, the 51 participants came from 20 countries, including the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, and nations of Europe and Asia.

The 18 women and 33 men, average age 33, included sales and marketing professionals, accountants, recruiters, engineers and IT specialists but also teachers, an architect and a designer. Most work for private companies or public organizations, but some already run their own business. Holders of a Bachelor's degree with at least two years of work experience, and, in the case of non-native speakers of English, good working English, may apply to join the JMEC program but many participants last year held higher qualifications. There were eight Master's degrees, three MBAs and one PhD.

Over the years, the number of Japanese applicants has been increasing. Forty five percent of participants in JMEC 17 were Japanese. If this is an indication of a growing desire among Japanese young businesspeople to broaden their operability in an international setting, then JMEC seems an attractive option that is available right at their doorstep.

The project clients

Each year there are about 10 project clients which equals 10 project teams of typically five to six participants.

The project clients include SMEs, global corporations and NPOs. Last year's clients included businesses as

diverse as multinational diversified technology company Sumitomo 3M Ltd., start-up Zava Holdings K.K., design and construction management services provider Lend Lease Japan, telecommunications provider PBXL and childhood-cancer charity The Tyler Foundation. Other project clients were Hafele Japan K.K., ERCO Lighting Ltd., TÜV SÜD Japan Ltd. and Honka Japan Inc.

Mark Ferris, co-founder of The Tyler Foundation, said: "Our JMEC team's business plan provided a lot of well-researched and carefully thought out information. Many suggestions we had already considered, but to see them presented by an external party, backed up by statistics and logic, was a powerful way to help us better understand our priorities."



Lucky winners of the second place prize, airline tickets to London. Project client: German company TÜV SÜD Japan Ltd. L to R: Sheldon Wong, Maki Shiomi, Jonas Werner.

Dr. Andreas F. Stange, President and CEO of TÜV SÜD Japan Ltd., is very happy with the business plan he received. "The engagement of the team members was remarkable. They considered solutions that we would probably have overlooked. This JMEC business plan will definitely help us with our market expansion in Japan."

"Our general impression was that the clients did get some very good ideas and good value," says Rike Wootten, president of K.K. Gotairiku Partners, and one of three JMEC judges.

The competition is on!

The 17 JMEC teams (2010/2011 program year) spent on average 1,400 hours on their plans, but four teams each spent more than 1,600 hours, with one close to 2,000 hours. Considering a participation fee of ¥1.2 million and an average of 1,400 hours, this is equal to a cost of just ¥850 per hour for project clients, which is a very affordable option especially for entrepreneurs and SMEs.



Members of the third place team won a two-night stay at any location of Small Luxury Hotels of the World. Project client: Finnish company Honka Japan Inc. L to R: Front: Mieko Mura, Kyoko El Mahguib; Back: Nic Swindler, Kevin Meek, Kentaro Blumenstengel (not pictured: Jesse Darja).

British Chamber of Commerce in Japan President Philip T. Gibb, also a JMEC judge, said: "The standard of the business plans and quality of the information and research this year was extremely high. The closeness of the final scores is testament to the effort put in by all participants."

In his speech at the Awards Ceremony, judge Wootten revealed that the competition was very close, with a difference of just one-third of one percent between 1st and 2nd places, and 2nd and 3rd places. And the difference between 3rd and 4th places, in other words winning a prize or not, was just 1.27%.

The JMEC 17 first place award went to Team 8 who wrote a business plan for Sumitomo 3M Ltd.; second place was awarded to Team 3 and their business plan for TÜV SÜD

Japan Ltd., and in third place came Team 4's plan for Honka Japan Inc.

Participant voices

Mary Fidler – member of the JMEC 17 first place winning team

Mary Fidler, born and raised in Washington state, is a member of the 1st prize winning team whose members each won an HP laptop and a one-year membership in the American Chamber of Commerce in Japan (ACCJ), along with free attendance at ACCJ events.

"We all felt very positive after the presentation to the judges, but I also knew that the competition was very strong. My expectation was to get as much out of the program as possible. Winning is pure icing on the cake," says Fidler.

Her motivations for participating in JMEC were to broaden her knowledge of business practices in general and to gain more specific knowledge of business practices in Japan, as well as the opportunity to meet seasoned entrepreneurs and people like herself who start their own companies.

Fidler, who is a jewelry designer and the director of Mokumedo, a jewelry brand that incorporates ancient Japanese metal techniques with a modern design, now hopes to take her business to the next level.

"I joined JMEC because I wanted to learn how to write a business plan for the company I want to launch. Now I feel that I have a good grasp of all the aspects required to produce a plan so that I can move my business forward," she adds.

Fidler's four teammates have not only become new friends for life but also her new business advisors.

"When you go through a competition like this together, the sense of accomplishment as a team is enormous. I have already warned my teammates that they will have to go

over the business plan that I will create for my company and everyone seems eager to help me," Fidler says.

Jonas Werner – member of the JMEC 17 second place winning team

Jonas Werner from Sweden, and his teammates, won the second prize in the JMEC 17 competition. They received vouchers for a return flight to London, courtesy of British Airways.



Rike Wootten, one of three JMEC judges, during his speech at the JMEC 17 Awards Ceremony.

Werner came to Japan for the first time in 2001 and again in 2009. He works as a Senior Specialist at the Telecom Sales division of a Japanese IT company. Despite a busy job and family obligations Werner looked for an opportunity to broaden his business skills and networks and he joined JMEC in autumn 2010.

"JMEC is a unique way to gain knowledge similar to that of a condensed MBA but with a focus on Japanese business. The practical, hands-on approach and the involvement of local experts in the training are very appealing," states Werner.

For Werner the real learning, and the challenge, started when this year's group of 51 JMEC participants was split into ten teams and each team was assigned one of ten real-life project clients.

"None of us on the team had any past experience in the client's industry. This really forced us to think out of the box and come up with novel solutions," Werner says.

Nic Swindler – member of the JMEC 17 third place winning team

Nic Swindler, a native of Kansas City, and his team won 3rd place and a two-night stay at any location of Small Luxury Hotels of the World. Swindler moved from the U.S. to Japan in 2008 because he wanted to pursue an international career and use his Japanese. He works at the recruitment firm The Ingenium Group.

Asked about what he takes away from JMEC, Swindler says new perspectives on how foreign companies in Japan operate and an understanding of the existing market potentials in Japan despite the economic turnaround.

"Participating in JMEC was probably my best decision of 2010. I am sure that I will reap the rewards from the lessons learned and the friends made in years to come, says Swindler.

"The speakers who joined us on several occasions really sparked some entrepreneurial interests which I never knew existed. I now see that business leaders' success—and by extension that of companies—is due largely to focus and effort. A good business plan can give you focus, but without a concerted effort to execute the plan it is just a bunch of paper."

JMEC 18 (program year 2011/2012) started in fall 2011 and will conclude in June 2012. The JMEC 18 Awards Ceremony is scheduled to take place on June 8, 2012. JMEC is currently recruiting corporate sponsors and project clients for JMEC 19 (program year 2012/2013).

For more information, please visit www.jmec.gr.jp/project-clients or contact the JMEC Program Director, Pierre Couret, at info@jmec.gr.jp.