



THE INTERNATIONAL MARKETER'S

Localisation Handbook for Japan



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Act local to win locally

A sustainable international expansion strategy

Foreign brands looking to grow in international markets need a sustainable international expansion strategy — one that secures short-term revenue without missing out on long-term profitability.

Localisation is an important component of this strategy as it contributes to building brand trust and establishing a local footprint.



On LinkedIn, ads by Japan-headquartered companies earn up to **3.6x higher engagement rate** from Japanese audiences, compared to ads by global companies.

LinkedIn platform data, all campaigns targeting Japanese IT and business decision makers, August 2024

** Source: Global Marketing Localization Trends for 2023, Content Marketing Institute*

As it stands, 84% of marketers report that localising content has either a moderately positive or highly positive effect on revenue.*

In markets like Japan, localised marketing campaigns can speak volumes: they tell your audience that you understand the nuances of their culture, recognise their unique needs and preferences, and are committed to serving them the way they want to be served. This can help drive market acceptance of your brand and support long-term revenue growth.

This handbook has been developed to help you win in Japan by offering guiding points for your marketing localisation efforts.

Find your localisation sweet spot

Brand positioning

Localisation is a lived experience. Take time to validate your assumptions with local stakeholders, like those in customer-facing roles.

The optimal level of marketing localisation depends on how you intend to position your brand in Japan.

Do you want to be perceived as a global brand with a strong Japanese presence? Or, do you want to fully embed your brand as a local, rather than global, player in the market?

This decision, along with resource availability, can help you determine your sweet spot on the localisation spectrum. Just remember that translation is often the first and simplest step but it is not a synonym for localisation.

Localisation spectrum



SIMPLE



Language

Use content written in, or translated into, the local language. This is the bare minimum when marketing in Japan, as English proficiency levels are not high.

▶▶ [Jump to best practices](#)



Culture & Imagery

Show that you understand local ways of doing business by incorporating cultural references, national occasions, colour symbolism, imagery with local faces and iconic landmarks, and more.

▶▶ [Jump to best practices](#)



Identity

Shed your global brand image to speak and act like a local market player. This involves a heavy, long-term investment in transforming your brand.

COMPLEX

Learn to do business in Japan

The Japanese way The Japanese sensibility is quite different from Western ones. Japanese people value harmony within the community. Even the Japanese language is built to subtly convey emotions, compared to English, which is better at communicating intentions and commands. These nuances are reflected in the way the Japanese work and do business.

In Japanese culture, the foundation of trust comes from *kizuna* (絆), a concept of enduring relationships. This often requires time and patience to build.

Honouring commitments like deadlines and product promises can help international brands build trust in the Japanese market. It's also important to learn to decipher the Japanese style of high-context communication, where a lot can be left unsaid, by looking beyond verbal cues for the full meaning of each sentence.



Communication	High context	Low context
Direct Negative Feedback	Very unlikely	Somewhat likely
Decision Making	Highly consensual	Somewhat consensual
Trust	Relationship-based	Task-based
Leadership	Hierarchical	Egalitarian

Adapted from The Cultural Map: Decoding how people think, lead and act and get things done across cultures, Erin Meyer

Learn to do business in Japan

Top cultural tips

98% of the 4.6M LinkedIn members in Japan are local.

Only 2% (or 110,000 members) are expatriates.



Business card exchange

It is common to exchange business cards with someone you are meeting for the first time. Business cards should always be offered and received with both hands.

Bowing

Bowing can be used to greet, thank or apologise. The angle and frequency can vary, but a deep bend at the waist is generally considered polite.

Punctuality

Punctuality is very important to the Japanese. Being late can undermine trust, so arriving a little earlier than agreed is always recommended.

Respect for silence

Silence in meetings and negotiations is regarded as a time for thought and reflection. It is important to wait until the person is ready to speak. Do not rush things and accept that conclusions may not always be reached on the spot.

Respect for hierarchy

In Japanese workplaces, absolute respect is shown to superiors. Instructions are expected to be followed. Loyalty is valued, with little-to-no disagreement with a supervisor's opinions or decisions.

Emphasis on the collective

The success of the team as a whole tends to be more important than that of individuals. A collaborative work ethic is expected and individual play is often discouraged.

Tune into the Japanese calendar

Market to local moments

Plan your campaigns to leverage key cultural occasions while accounting for off-seasons when people may be away.



Golden Week in Japan is a series of national holidays from end April (Showa Day) to early May (Children's Day). Many Japanese take time off to travel and businesses may operate shorter hours.



Christmas Day is not a public holiday in Japan. Many Japanese would take time off around New Year, a period known as *shogatsu* (正月) from 29 December to 3 January, to usher in the new year.

January

- 1 New Year's Day
- 8 Coming of Age Day

February

- 3 Setsubun
- 11 National Foundation Day
- 14 Valentine's Day

March

- 3 Hinamatsuri
- 20 The first day of spring

April

- 1 April Fool's Day
- 29 Showa Day

May

- 3 Constitution Memorial Day
- 4 Greenery Day
- 5 Children's Day
- 12 Mother's Day

June

- 16 Father's Day

July

- 7 Tanabata

August

- 11 Mountain's Day
- 15 War-End Anniversary

September

- 16 Respect-for-the-Aged Day
- 22 Autumnal Equinox Day

October

- 14 Sports Day

November

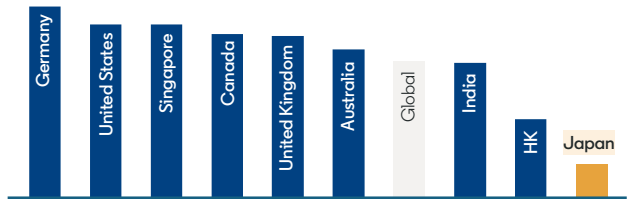
- 3 Culture Day
- 15 Shichigosan
- 23 Labour Thanksgiving Day

December

- 25 Christmas Day
- 31 New Year's Eve

How to prepare for the long game in Japan

A Japan-based LinkedIn member is 48% less likely than the global average to complete a Lead Gen Form. Compared to other international markets, driving leads in Japan can feel much harder.



Likelihood of converting to a lead, LinkedIn platform data
 Median form-fill rate/on lead gen form sponsored content for 6-month time period between Mar-2024 to Aug-2024

Unlocking Japan's market potential takes time. It requires an investment in long-term, relationship-based brand building alongside conversion-based marketing efforts:

Set expectations with your leadership that conversions are unlikely to happen within the first three months of marketing in Japan.

Build brand trust over time by positioning your brand as a trusted partner that understands Japanese culture.

Consistently demonstrate what your brand solves for and how this translates into value for local customers.

Adopt a nurture-based strategy, using LinkedIn's retargeting feature to send successive messages to audiences who have engaged with your brand.

The feature allows you to retarget visitors to your website and LinkedIn Page as well as audiences who previously engaged with your LinkedIn ads.

▶ [Explore retargeting](#)

Targeting

Build consensus in decision-making

Engage the entire buying committee

Because Japan values group harmony, business decisions are often made via consensus. Targeting decision-makers is less effective than engaging (and convincing) the entire buying committee.

Broaden your campaign targeting to include a range of seniorities and job functions.

Enable internal consensus with rich information

Use case studies & customer testimonials as social proof of your solutions

Share white papers via Document Ads for easy download and internal circulation

Ad creatives

Localise your creative approach

Use emotion for effective ads

Localisation on a deeper level taps into the emotional drivers that can make an international brand successful in Japan.

LinkedIn partnered with creative effectiveness platform **System1** to study how some of the world's biggest tech companies utilise emotion to build their brand in Japan.

Our research revealed that existing ads in Japan fare poorly in emotional response and brand recall, which are directly related to short-term sales uplift and long-term growth.

We uncovered two creative excellence lessons that can help international marketers build effective brands in Japan.

Research methodology

Each creative is tested with 150 B2B sector respondents. The methodology is a 6-8-minute online monadic survey in Japanese. We ask people how they feel about each ad using our FaceTrace® emotional measurement tool, used on over 10m people worldwide. The survey also captures a range of diagnostic measures aimed at improving the effectiveness of the creative.



Ad creatives Localise your creative approach

Research finding 1

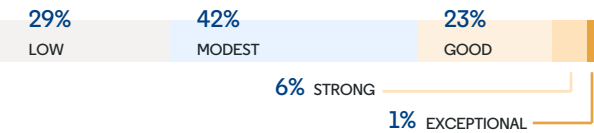
“We must command attention to build brand. And the presence of right-brain features in digital ads leads to greater ad attention in-feed.”

Andrew Tindall
SVP Global Partnerships
System 1

▶ Meet System1

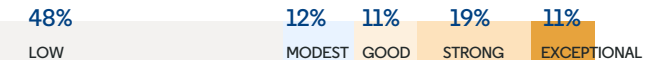
Star Rating: Modest

Star Rating measures the emotional response to an ad creative and is a predictor of long-term market share gains. Majority of B2B ads in Japan (71%) achieved a Low-to-Modest Star Rating for being unable to evoke a positive emotional response.



Spike Rating: Low

Spike Rating is a predictor of short-term sales potential based on an ad’s strength of branding and intensity of emotional response. Over half (60%) of B2B ads in Japan achieved a Low-to-Modest Spike-Rating for their ability to drive sales uplift.



The Lesson

Incorporate emotional strategies and storytelling

B2B marketers are struggling to evoke a strong, positive emotional response through their ads because most creatives rely on a rational approach and do not incorporate storytelling and characters. On LinkedIn, B2B ads tend to under-utilise emotions like happiness and surprise, which are shown to positively impact overall appeal and engagement among Japanese audiences. Creatives that evoke strong, positive emotional responses are correlated with memorability and a desire to buy.

A positive emotional response to your ad leads to a positive evaluation of choice. Even if audiences are not in the market to make a purchase now, this positive association will guide them towards your brand when they are ready to buy in the future.

Ad creatives

Localise your creative approach

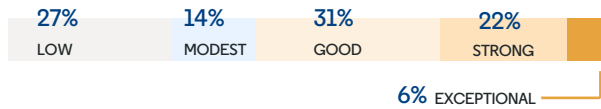
Research finding 2

“In a skippable world, it’s not enough to ensure your branding is upfront. Ensure the first 2 seconds of the asset is used to build fluency the most.”

► Meet System1

Brand Fluency: Low

Fluency measures strength of branding in an ad. This is important because if a brand is recognised quickly and easily, it is considered a good choice. Almost half the ads studied (41%) were rated Low or Modest because audiences were unable to accurately recognise the brand by the end of the ad.



Fast Fluency: Low

Fast Fluency measures the speed of brand recognition. Over half (54%) of ads surveyed were rated Low/Modest based on the number of respondents who could recognise the brand in two seconds. This matters because research has found that ads need to keep someone’s attention for at least 2.5 seconds in order to influence memory.¹



¹ Source: “Understanding the “triple jeopardy” threat of advertising attention” WARC 2022

The Lesson

Brand early and consistently

Despite being some of the world's biggest brands, most of the companies that we studied struggled with brand recognition in Japan.

Even global brands need to achieve strong levels of fluency or brand recognition when marketing in Japan. Help audiences recognise your brand through branding elements that appear early and consistently throughout your ads.

Ad creatives

Localise your creative approach

Emotional appeal of characters with agency



▶ [Jump to AWS case study](#)

Our research shows that only a few B2B ads by foreign brands targeting Japanese audiences were creatively effective in their ability to hold attention and evoke position emotions. This is an opportunity for international marketers to craft made-for-Japan ads that focus emotional storytelling.

It helps to understand that the two hemispheres of the brain have different attentional styles: the right brain is more empathetic and suited for brand building; the left brain sees linear cause and effect and responds well to sales activations.

Bank on right-brain tactics

The right brain is the more emotional side and responds well to the living. Feature characters with a relatable personality and who have a clear role in bringing the story to life. Avoid showing a mass of people or generic individuals. Also consider the location/setting of the ad. It should be an easily identifiable place as the right brain looks for perspective and depth.

Dial back on left-brain features

Our research in Japan shows that B2B ads that rely on left-brain features like voiceovers and fast-cut scenes do not perform as well. Highly product-centric creatives without stories and characters tend to result in low levels of emotional appeal and engagement.



Product-centric ads do play a role in driving short-term sales. However, in Japan, it's important to build strong, long-term connections with your audiences. This is vital in growing brand salience and market share.

Ad creatives

Localise your creative approach

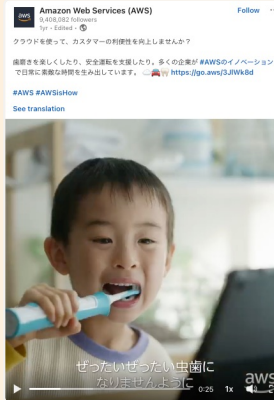
Case study: Amazon Web Services

Amazon Web Services offers cloud computing services. Its brand ad in Japan tells a feel-good story by following the day of a little boy and highlighting moments made better by AWS solutions.

Star Rating: Good

This ad scored 3.4 (Good), which is 1.9x higher than the average of 1.82 (Modest).

▶ [Watch the ad](#)



Branding levers

The early and consistent use of brand devices throughout the ad supports accurate and fast brand recognition. The ad opens with the AWS logo, which is maintained throughout the video at the bottom right-hand corner. All product moments are also clearly labelled “Powered by AWS”.

Emotional levers

The story does well to depict the close relationship and bond between the boy and his father via their interactions through the day and moments of unspoken communication. Spontaneous changes in the boy’s facial expression also contribute strongly and positively to overall appeal and engagement.

These aspects make the characters relatable and help audience emotionally connect with the story and the brand.

Ad creatives

Localise your creative approach

Case study: Dell Technologies

Dell Technologies offers essential digital infrastructure. By combining its brand story with a customer's success and testimonial, the ad serves up social proof and inspiration while evoking confidence in audiences.

Brand Fluency: Good

This ad scored 81 (Good), which is 1.4x higher than the average of 57 (Low).

Fast Fluency: Good

This ad scored 54 (Good), which is 1.7x higher than the average of 31 (Low).

▶ [Watch the ad](#)



Branding levers

The early and consistent use of brand devices throughout the ad supports accurate and fast brand recognition.

The ad opens with the Dell Technologies logo, which prominently appears in the middle and at the end as well.



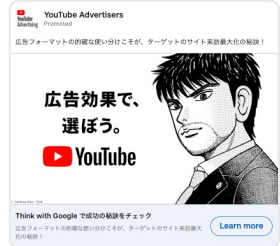
Ad creatives

Localise your creative approach

Feature cultural assets prominently

Use pop culture references from sources like manga

Manga is a big part of Japanese culture. It is instantly recognisable and can quickly capture attention. Manga evokes a sense of familiarity and creates an emotional connection with the audience.



Adopt the distinctively Japanese vertical copy format

Japanese script is traditionally read from top to bottom. Incorporating this not only adds aesthetic appeal and cultural authenticity but could also offer more a natural way for native Japanese to take in your messages.



Feature Japanese people and/or landmarks

This makes your ads more relatable to the local audience as it reflects their daily lives and environments. It could also evoke a sense of pride and national identity. Combined, this can help foster a positive emotional response to your brand messages.



Ad creatives

Localise your creative approach

Creative excellence checklist



Incorporate emotional strategies and storytelling

Invest in ads with a mix of emotions: neutral, happy, and surprise. Incorporate different forms of happiness in your storytelling, such as excitement, uplifting moments, sensory pleasure, contentment, relief, and amusement, as these resonate well in Japan.

Brand early and consistently

Ensure that your brand is recognisable within the first two seconds. Highlight your brand logo and other brand elements throughout your ad.

Feature relatable characters in identifiable settings

Use characters with clear roles and actions in your ads to create an emotional connection with audiences.

Use captions and subtitles

Add captions for better engagement. In videos, include subtitles to enhance understanding and engagement, especially if non-Japanese words are shown or spoken on screen.

Feature cultural assets prominently

Strengthen relevance and relatability by incorporating local cultural assets in your ads.

Ad copy

Speak like a local

A/B test English and Japanese ad copy

When targeting Japanese audiences on LinkedIn, ads in the Japanese language earn **2x higher Engagement Rate and Clickthrough Rate** vs ads in other languages.

LinkedIn platform data, engagement objective posts targeting Japanese IT decision makers and Japanese business decisions, 2022-2024

It's worthwhile A/B testing the same ad in English and Japanese to understand which works better for your target audience. There are two ways to set up your LinkedIn Ads campaign to achieve this:

Create two separate campaigns and select the corresponding profile language under Audience Targeting.

Your audience has their Profile Language set to **English**

Your audience has their Profile Language set to **Japanese**

Create one campaign with the profile language set to 'English' and include ads in English and Japanese.

By selecting English, your campaign will target all members in Japan regardless of their language settings.

How Japanese ads will display

Whether in the LinkedIn feed or LinkedIn Audience Network placements, Japanese ads display fully in Japanese. Only your company name and website URL will remain in English.



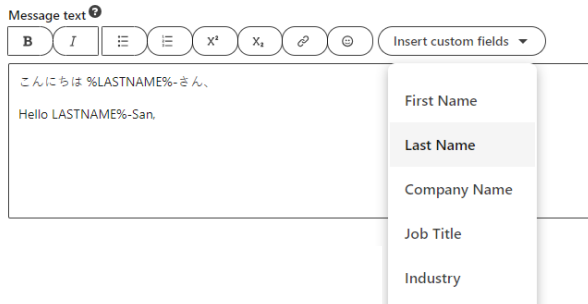
Ad copy

Speak like a local

Strike up a conversation

In Japan, people add *san* (さん) to names as a salutation, similar to Mr/Ms in English. The term is gender-neutral and using it shows cultural respect and formality.

When using LinkedIn’s Sponsored Messaging, address your audience politely by adding *san* (さん) after their name. Use the custom field to do this easily.



Ask a question to encourage contemplation & engagement

In Japanese culture, asking questions can be a polite way to suggest ideas without being too assertive. Japanese audiences also tend to enjoy communication that encourages contemplation. By asking a question, you’re further showing that you value their opinions.

Asking questions in ad copy can produce up to +20% higher Engagement Rate in Japan.

“What is the key to proactive customer service?”



LinkedIn Internal Data for all paid creatives in 2023 exposed to Japan audience which had a question vs those creatives that did not have a question

Ad copy

Speak like a local

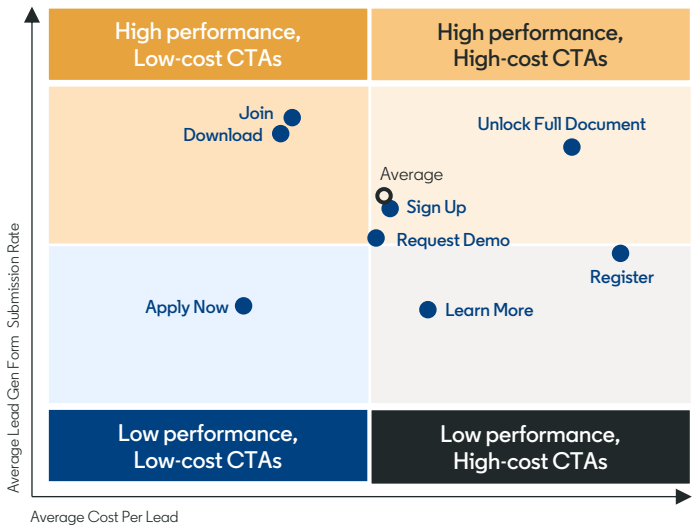
Be a polite partner and use gentle CTAs

Using imperatives like “act now” may come across as overly assertive to Japanese audiences. Position your brand as a trusted partner and invite them to take your desired action instead.

“Let’s shift to Azure to achieve the following.”



LinkedIn’s platform data shows that in Japan, common Call to Actions (CTAs) can perform very differently, so choose yours wisely.



Source: LinkedIn internal data, November 2023 to April 2024, based on a sample size of 352

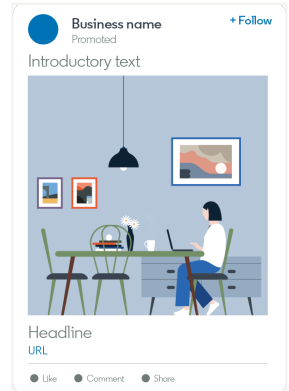
Ad formats

Leverage best-performers in Japan

Maximise real estate in the feed for higher engagement

On LinkedIn, vertical and square formats, which take up more space in the feed, tend to get more attention and engagement in Japan compared to horizontal formats.

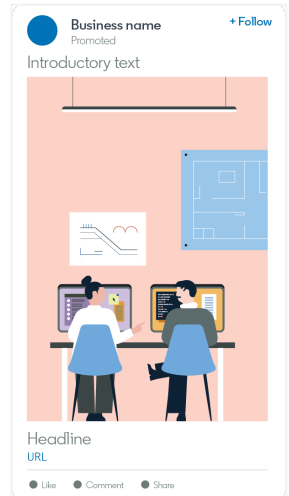
Use square formats for **+21% Engagement Rate** vs horizontal formats.



Use vertical formats for **+10% Engagement Rate** vs horizontal formats.

For Single Image Ads, vertical formats perform best in terms of CTR on mobile. Vertical formats do not deliver on desktop.

▶ [See LinkedIn Ads Guide](#)



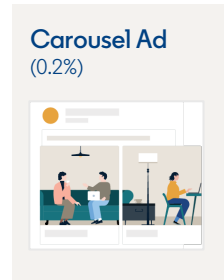
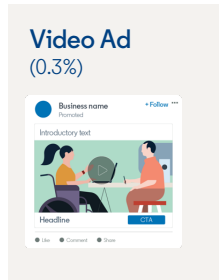
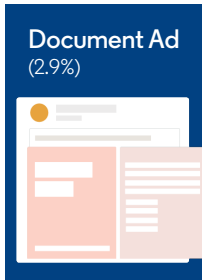
Ad formats

Leverage best-performers in Japan

Use best-performing ad formats for your objective

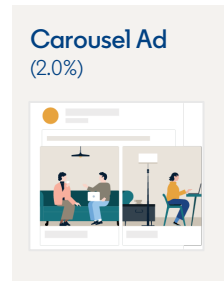
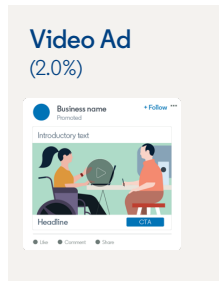
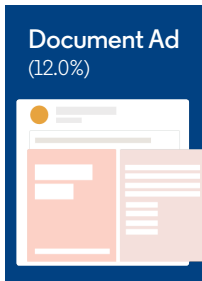
Brand Awareness

Based on Engagement Rate



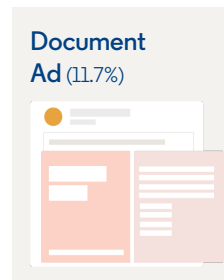
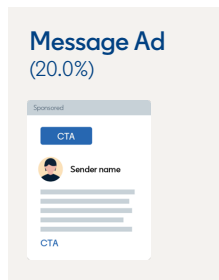
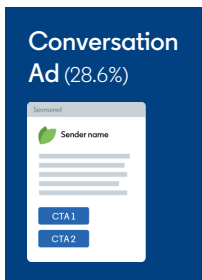
Engagement

Based on Engagement Rate



Lead Generation

Based on Lead Form Completion Rate



Source: LinkedIn Internal Data / Reporting Period: August 2022 – July 2023 | Target Audience: LinkedIn Members in Japan |

Reference: Engagement Rate: Total Impressions/Total Engagements | Data for all Japan members from 1st October 2023 – 30 September 2024

Placement

Media planning like a local

Extend your local reach with LinkedIn Audience Network

● **4x more impressions** when targeting Japan-based members with both LinkedIn feed activity and LinkedIn Audience Network.

● Up to **88% lower CPM** for brand awareness campaigns.

● Up to **81% lower CPC** for website visit campaigns.

LinkedIn Campaign Manager as of August 2024 – individual performance may vary.

It's important to consistently engage audiences in Japan to build brand trust and nurture relationships. As part of your localisation strategy, you also want your brand to be seen on local platforms.

Advertise like a local by supplementing your LinkedIn activity with LinkedIn Audience Network. Activating this enables your existing ads to be served to the same target audience when they visit trusted third-party publishers and apps, improving reach, frequency and cost efficiency along the way.

Popular Japanese publishers & apps



Popular international publishers & apps



LinkedIn Audience Network is available for the following campaign objectives: Brand Awareness, Website Visits, Video Views, and Website Conversions.

Japan localisation tip sheet

Find your localisation sweet spot

Start simple with language localisation, go deeper with culture and imagery that show you understand local nuances, or shed your global identity to transform your brand into a local one.

Tailor your marketing strategy for Japan

Understand that unlocking Japan's market potential takes time. Invest in building a trusted, long-term brand while running conversion-based marketing efforts.

Sync with Japan's national calendar

Plan your campaigns to leverage local moments and key cultural occasions while accounting for off-seasons when people may be away.

Build consensus in decision-making by targeting broadly

Target the entire buying committee instead of just decision-makers as decisions are often made via consensus in Japan.

Use emotional strategies and storytelling

Majority of B2B ads in Japan are ineffective in evoking a positive emotional response, which correlates to memorability and desire to buy. Feature relatable characters that help bring your brand story to life.

Brand early and consistently in ads

Help audiences quickly and accurately recognise your brand with branding elements that appear early and consistently throughout your ads.

Test and learn what works for your audience in Japan

While 65% of LinkedIn members in Japan use Japanese as their profile language and English proficiency is generally not high, try testing the same ad in English and Japanese to gauge performance.

Speak like a local in your ad copy

Avoid being overly assertive. The Japanese tend to respond better to ad copy that asks questions, uses polite language and invites action via gentle CTAs.

Prioritise top-performing ad formats in Japan

Use Video Ads for brand awareness, Conversation Ads for engagement, and Message Ads for lead generation.

Be seen on popular Japanese publishers and apps

Get 4x more impressions when targeting Japan-based members with both LinkedIn feed activity and LinkedIn Audience Network. It also helps your brand be seen on popular Japanese publishers and apps.

Go B2Beyond with

Linked 

Keep exploring