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Select Japanese Skills

## A Proven Strategy Nets Over 70% of the International Market Cosmetic Sponges Loved the World Over

Photography/ Susumu Nagao Interview and text/ Kyoko Ohtsu



Mitsuhiro Sakamoto, President of Yukigaya Chemical Industry Co. Ltd. Under his guidance the company stands ready to give shape to flashes of inspiration from daily life.

Skin condition is not the only factor that determines how smoothly makeup can be applied. The tools used for application are important as well, and changing these can make a dramatic difference in achieving a more desirable effect. Yukigaya Chemical Industry Company is a sponge manufacturer that holds over 70% of the world market for cosmetic sponges. Japanese cosmetics manufacturers such as Shiseido and Kose and world-famous cosmetics brands such as Lancôme and Estee Lauder all rely deeply on the company for their cosmetic sponge needs.

Cosmetic sponges must be strong and durable since they are used on a daily basis by their owners. Because they are in contact with women's skin, their feel on the skin is also highly important. However, "feel" is an unpredictable quality that only finds its form when there is a perfect match between the

user's preferences and the quality of the foundation used.

With this in mind, the fact that Yukigaya Chemical's sponges are loved by women all over the world, is very interesting indeed. The secret of their success lies not in making an all-purpose sponge, but rather in making a huge variety of sponges to suit different women and their foundations in every country.

The company has a sample book in various languages containing a wide range of sample sponges arranged by order of firmness, color, shape, and surface finish. Having this available streamlines the process of creating a product. In Japan skin-tone sponges are most commonly used, but in the West white is the predominant color. Preferences for firmness and thickness also vary from country to country.

"We have the basic technology, so we are confident of being able to fulfill the requests of manufacturers in any

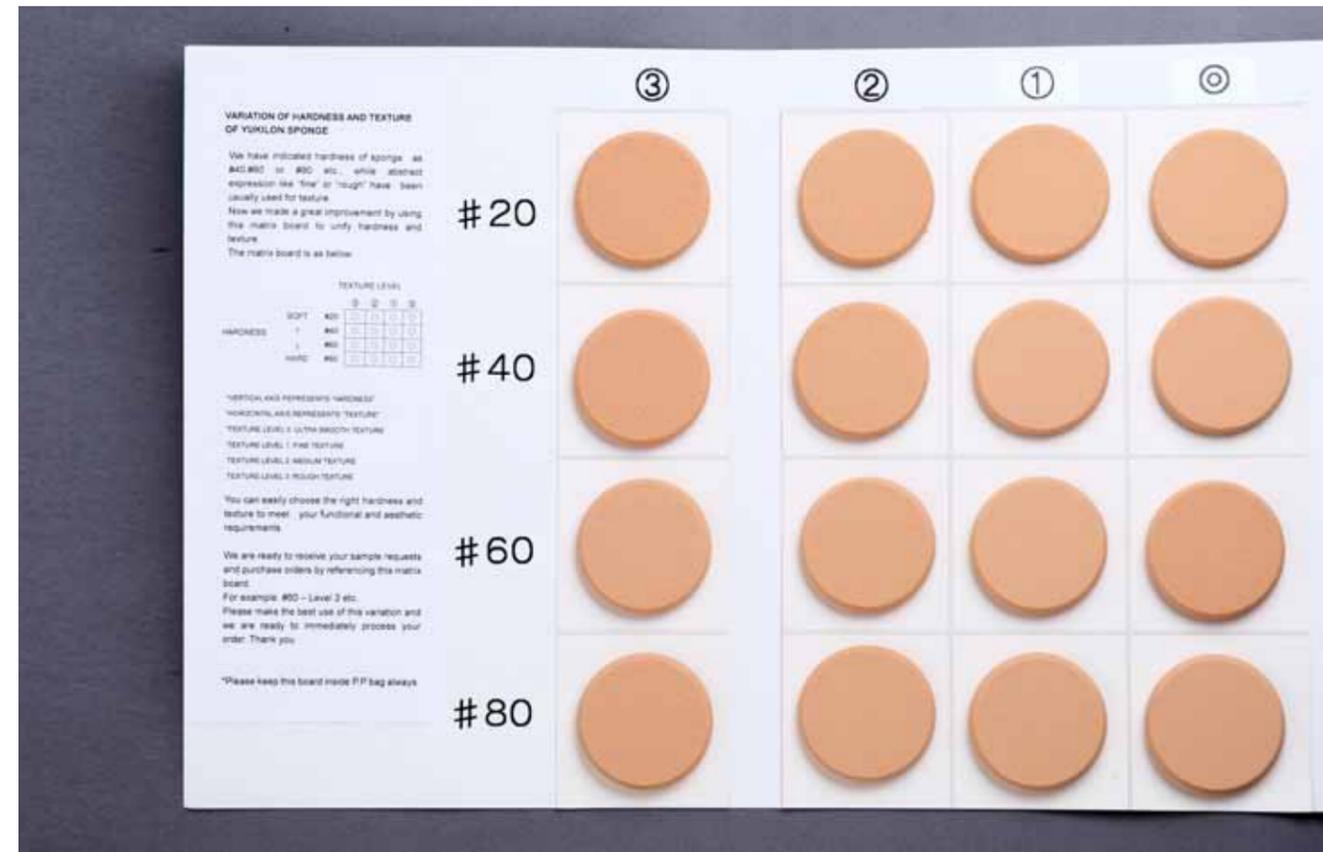
country," boasts Yukigaya President, Mitsuhiro Sakamoto.

### Quality is Bound to Be Recognized

What are the qualities of a good cosmetic sponge? The answer to this is that it should feel good to touch, not harden with time, and not change color. Meeting all these requirements necessitates employing various measures and strategies that make the price of these products 30 to 40% higher than those of other companies'. But top quality cosmetics manufacturers can accept that and still choose Yukigaya Chemical's sponges in the end.

"I think it's because they are cosmetics manufacturers who understand the pursuit of beauty, and that gives them the ability to decide on a cost outlay for quality products," says President Sakamoto.

Sponge samples sorted by firmness and foaming. From top to bottom is soft to firm. Left to right is coarse to fine.



Color samples. Sometimes special orders are made for colors not available in the samples.





The sponge tip on these makeup applicators is also a Yukigaya product. In the past they deteriorated easily, but nowadays they are strong enough to last until all the makeup has been used up.



In the 1970s sponges used to swell up in the areas that absorbed oil (left). The Yukilon sponge doesn't swell even when it absorbs oil. (right)



The sponge inner padding of these bras is also made by Yukigaya. Material that holds its shape and does not change color is essential for light colored underwear.



The Tsukuba plant and two overseas factories in China and Thailand together produce over fifteen million sponges every month. The material is poured still foaming into a mold, steamed, then removed from the mold by twisting up with two hands. This work must be performed by hand since the material is too soft to be handled by machines.



The foam polyurethane Tera Polyca is used for the edges of high quality audio speakers, such as those used for home theatres, and is also now widely used in mid-price range speakers.

### PVA: A New Product Useful in Wastewater Treatment and Purification



One centimeter blocks of PVA. Its water absorption and retention capabilities are excellent, as is its abrasion resistance. The idea of purifying water by housing microorganisms in holes is currently undergoing verification.



Water purification using PVA is tested through various experiments under different conditions. Even the President is conducting a water purification experiment with PVA in his pond at home.

Yukigaya Chemical was founded in 1951. In those days it mainly manufactured products such as cushioning for bed mattresses and inner padding for brassieres. Cosmetics sales increased with the rise in women's buying power during Japan's period of rapid economic growth in the late 1950s. But the sponges used to apply foundation were plagued by the problem of deterioration, brought about by the natural rubber from which they were made. Oil in the foundation caused a chemical reaction which made the sponge expand. They were also vulnerable to UV rays, and would eventually fall apart. In 1977, after a compact-type foundation by Kose exploded in popularity, a string of similar foundations came onto the market.

Demand for sponges also shot up all at once, unexpectedly making the problem of sponge deterioration much more prominent. All over Japan there were incidents of "sponges swelling up and foundation cases not closing." That's when Yukigaya Chemical decided to begin developing an oil resistant sponge, with President Sakamoto, then head of the sales department, playing a major part in the process. The synthetic rubber sponge they developed after repeated trial and error was given the name Yukilon. But an unexpected hurdle needed to be cleared before Yukilon could make its debut. Although the functionality of the sponge had improved, its appearance was exactly the same, and it therefore lacked a decisive factor that would convince manufacturers to choose it.

"I consulted someone I knew in a processing factory, and they trimmed the sponge corners for me. Cutting away the right-angled corners made the sponges seem much more stylish" President Sakamoto explains. Kose became the first company to adopt the Yukilon sponges, which immediately became hugely popular with customers. Shiseido and other major cosmetics manufacturers all followed suit, and eventually Yukilon cosmetic sponges were being used throughout Japan. The Yukilon sponge has a fine texture that feels good on the skin and can spread foundation thinly and evenly. It also has excellent durability and can be washed repeatedly, making it easy to keep clean, something that struck a chord with the sensibilities of the

cleanliness-loving Japanese people. Starting with Revlon it also gained acceptance amongst overseas manufacturers, and the market share expanded steadily. Currently more than 1,000 types of sponge are manufactured for cosmetics brands all over the world.

### The Pursuit of Distinctiveness

"When you look at the gaps, they seem to be filled in," says President Sakamoto. There are always gaps between two solid parts. Look closely at a smart phone or a digital camera, and your eyes are drawn to the sections where dust or water might get in, but "these gaps can be eliminated with our company's distinctive

technology and products." The company actually developed new materials with vibration control and waterproof properties. These materials are used for various applications, such as car components, sports equipment and medical items. For example, the highly functional polyurethane Tera Polyca, developed in 2006, is an essential material in luxury speakers because of its superb vibration control qualities. Similarly, Yukilon's distinctive feature is that it does not deteriorate easily and can be used for long periods, because its raw materials are resistant to heat and UV rays. The next focus for the company is wastewater treatment with a new material called PVA. PVA has outstanding water retention efficiency and many holes. The company came

up with the idea that microorganisms housed in these holes might be able to purify unclean water. At present the annual electricity bill for Tokyo's wastewater treatment is around 50 billion yen. However, if PVA could be utilized on a semi-permanent basis, it would not only greatly reduce the electricity bill, but would undoubtedly receive more attention in the near future as an ecological form of wastewater treatment.

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