



Scandal involving false food labeling could harm Japan brand reputation

The Yomiuri Shimbun The scandal involving the false labeling of food seems to be endless. It has spread from the hotel industry to restaurants and the food sections of department stores, among other businesses.

We are astonished by the lack of morals in these industries as a whole.

Black tiger shrimp was labeled “kuruma ebi” Japanese tiger prawn, ready-made juice in cartons was presented as “fresh juice” and Australian beef was called “Japanese beef,” to name a few examples of misrepresentation.

After the revelation of such cases, executives of hotels and department stores made such excuses as “We had little understanding of how precisely we should label [the products]” or “We didn’t check raw materials.”

There is no end to cases in which executives concerned do not admit they falsely labeled products, but insist the food items were “mistakenly labeled.” Clearly, they are simply trying to say they did not intentionally misrepresent products.

However, the Law against Unjustifiable Premiums and Misleading Representations does not address whether an act was done intentionally or negligently in cases of “representations that may mislead consumers as to the quality of goods.”

It is illegal to deceive customers into believing that a consumer good is far better or more advantageous than it is in reality. We think the current series of false representations falls under this category.

Consumers deeply trust hotels and department stores. That is why they pay relatively high prices in exchange for high-quality services. These businesses should be keenly aware of the heavy responsibility they bear for deceiving consumers.

Among the various false representations, “restructured” meat was mislabeled as genuine “beef steak.” Restructured meat contains such ingredients as milk constituents, wheat and soybeans, all of which can cause allergic reactions in consumers. The menus did not explain that fact. Some hotels even served dishes without knowing what raw materials were contained in the food.

In the worst cases, food allergies can result in death. We are shocked by such sloppy behavior.

Industries must reflect: A ryokan Japanese-style inn in the city of Nara also served restructured



meat to customers as Japanese beef. Ryokan staffers asked guests whether they had food allergies without telling them they would be served restructured meat. They then served the actual Japanese beef listed on the menu only to guests who had food allergies. There is no justification for such behavior.

The Consumer Affairs Agency, which has started an investigation into the false-labeling cases, this week asked industry organizations of hotels and department stores to compile and submit reports to the agency one month from now on their efforts to appropriately represent food on menus and in other situations. These entire industries must respond sincerely to the situation.

One factor behind the endless false representations is a lack of knowledge among those involved in the industries. The Consumer Affairs Agency has issued a guidebook to the industries describing concrete examples of violations of the law against misleading representations and what constitutes misleading representations, and asked them to improve the situation. It is important to make every person working in the industries thoroughly aware of the rules regarding representation.

The government will hold an emergency meeting of ministries and agencies related to the matter at the beginning of the week.

If the current fiasco is prolonged, business opportunities such as year-end sales are likely to be adversely affected. Such a situation may also harm the credibility of “Japan brand” products and services, which are praised by foreign countries and tourists for their safety and security.

Administrative instructions by the government are necessary, but what is primarily required is that all food-related industries change their behavior and make efforts to regain the trust of consumers. (From The Yomiuri Shimbun, Nov. 9, 2013)

Rice subsidy system to end in 5 yrs

Jiji Press The government on Wednesday proposed scrapping its rice production adjustment system in five years, aiming to make domestic agriculture more competitive after the country’s planned participation in a Trans-Pacific Partnership free trade pact.

The Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries Ministry presented its draft plan to end the gentan acreage reduction system, which maintains the prices of the nation’s staple food, to a Liberal Democratic Party meeting on agricultural issues.

The government hopes to make a final decision on the termination of the system, introduced in



the early 1970s, by the end of this month. Many lawmakers in the ruling party, however, oppose such a drastic agricultural reform measure.

Under the plan, the government would no longer give production targets for rice intended for staple food to farmers who accept output controls, officials said. Instead, the government would make available detailed supply-demand data, including on sales and stock levels, for each of the country's 47 prefectures, so that rice farmers can decide for themselves how much to produce, the officials said. (November 7, 2013)

Prime Minister's Office to promote special zones

The Yomiuri ShimbunThe Prime Minister's Office will lead efforts to promote National Strategic Special Zones, which are considered to be a major element of the government's growth strategy, following Cabinet approval of a relevant bill.

The government adopted the bill at a Cabinet meeting Tuesday to launch the zones where drastic deregulatory steps will be taken to promote private investment.

Under the bill submitted Tuesday to the Diet, the government will set up an advisory council, which will effectively be the top decision-making body on the special zones. With the move, the government prepared a system to promote the zones under the leadership of the Prime Minister's Office by centralizing authority on the prime minister.

The bill is expected to pass the Diet during the current session, which ends in December.

However, the government has started seeking a new key growth strategy partly because in such fields as employment and medical services, which initially were included as those where large deregulatory steps will be taken, the extent of deregulation was largely reduced.

Speaking at a meeting of the government and the ruling parties held at the Prime Minister's Office on Tuesday, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe said it is important not to regard growth strategies as mere slogans, but to boldly execute them in a swift manner to rejuvenate the economy, showing his determination to enact the bill at an early stage.

Under the bill, the government will set up the special advisory council, headed by Abe, to work out basic policies and decide where the special zones will be set up.

Under groups to be created for each special zone, necessary deregulatory items will be chosen to clarify the characteristics of each zone.



Cabinet ministers that hold jurisdiction over regulations will be excluded in the decision-making process at the advisory panel and groups to ensure the elimination of resistance of regulatory agencies.

However, such measures as the clarification of rules on dismissal at businesses and large-scale deregulation aimed at encouraging companies to enter the agricultural sector were postponed. The inclusion of a system in which companies subsidize housing loans for employees at the final stage of the compilation of the bill has also invited criticism from some quarters that it may give new authority to the government.

After the enactment of the bill, the government will choose three to five areas possibly early next year and begin the necessary paperwork to make them special zones.

Having become able to submit an important bill, the government is now seeking a new policy theme apparently with the hope of attracting market attention to Abenomics, the economic policy advanced by Abe.

Diet members belonging to the government's Council on Economic and Fiscal Policy as well as the Industrial Competitiveness Council met at the Cabinet Office in mid-October, and confirmed they will seek a common policy theme.

Such fields as the taxation system, social security and the promotion of local small and midsize enterprises have emerged as possible policy themes, but the focus has not yet been fixed since they lack appeal. (November 7, 2013)

Athletes to get 2nd natl training center

The Yomiuri Shimbun With the 2020 Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games in mind, the Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology Ministry and the Tokyo metropolitan government have agreed to build the second National Training Center for athletes next to the current NTC in Kita Ward, Tokyo, it has been learned.

The ministry and the metropolitan government have started discussions on the second NTC, which would become a central facility for training potential Olympic athletes. They will negotiate with the Finance Ministry and other relevant authorities with an aim of completing the facility in several years from now.

The Japanese Olympic Committee had told the central government repeatedly that the construction of a second NTC would be necessary if Japan is to increase the number of medals it



wins in the Games.

At a meeting on Wednesday, Olympic minister Hakubun Shimomura, Tokyo Gov. Naoki Inose and JOC President Tsunekazu Takeda reportedly agreed, in essence, that the metropolitan government would provide the land adjacent to the first NTC, or Ajinomoto Training Center, and the central government would construct the facility. At the candidate site for the new NTC in Nishigaoka in the ward, demolition work is currently under way on the former headquarters of the Tokyo Metropolitan Industrial Technology Research Center.

Using the land owned by the metropolitan government could help reduce construction costs, which are estimated at about ¥10 billion. Details of the contract, including tenancy, will be discussed in the future.

According to the metropolitan government, the site is about 33,400 square meters, including both the site for the former research center's main building and that for the annex, which are separated by a road.

Facilities of the current NTC include the 19,941-square-meter main indoor training center, the 21,998-square-meter track and field training site and accommodations. The center also has specialist facilities for such disciplines as gymnastics, judo, volleyball and tennis.

However, many sports associations had called for expanded facilities. Complaints included the inability to hold training camps for athletes from different age groups at the same time.

The government also is considering offering the second NTC to foreign athletes hoping to train immediately before the Tokyo Games because it is feared there will be a lack of training facilities for them. (November 9, 2013)

Consumer spending up in big cities

Jiji Press Growth in consumer spending, a driving force behind the economic recovery, has been more pronounced in the three metropolitan areas around Tokyo, Osaka and Nagoya than elsewhere, according to a Cabinet Office report.

The report on regional economies revealed that the effects of Abenomics have not yet been fully felt outside major urban areas.

In its monthly economic reports, the Cabinet Office publishes a comprehensive consumption index aimed at gauging consumer spending by using such data as household expenditures and



retail and wholesale sales. (November 5, 2013)

Convenience stores cater to women, elderly people



A FamilyMart store in Chiyoda Ward, Tokyo, has a pharmacy with a waiting area.

The Yomiuri Shimbun Convenience stores are enhancing their services and product offerings to accommodate women and elderly people in an effort to develop new customer bases, as competition has intensified among the major operators, which have been aggressively expanding.

Lawson Inc. changed its tagline in October to “Machi no kenko suteshon” (Your local health station) from “Machi no hotto suteshon” (Your local relaxation station).

The operator opened its first Natural Lawson store in 2001 to cater mainly to female customers. It now aims to enhance the chain’s health-oriented image and increase the number of Natural Lawson stores to 3,000 in five years—about 30 times the current figure.

It plans to offer more health-oriented items, including specially produced low-carb, low-calorie bread and fresh, high-quality vegetables. It also plans to provide health counseling at its shops.

FamilyMart plans to expand its chain of shops with in-house pharmacies or supermarkets specializing in foodstuffs to accommodate women shoppers. It also launched a planning team of women to develop new items.

Seven-Eleven aims to increase its array of single-serving deli items that can be served right after heating. The strategy is a response to the increasing number of small elderly households and working women.



One reason for such moves by major operators is that the market is nearing saturation.

According to a 2012 survey conducted by the Japan Franchise Association, the number of convenience stores nationwide topped 50,000 for the first time at 50,206.

Tobacco sales, which once accounted for 20 to 30 percent of the industry's sales, have been stagnant at existing shops as demand has declined. The shops have found themselves unable to survive relying solely on the young, male demographic that once comprised the majority of customers.

Midsized operators have shared the same sense of urgency, even as major operators have tried to distinguish themselves from competitors.

Circle K Sunkus Co. plans to lower prices for daily necessities, in line with similar moves by supermarkets, through strengthened cooperation with the group's supermarkets in merchandise procurement and logistics.

Three F Co., which operates stores in the Kanto region, has also resolved to win over customers through "lunch boxes with a hand-made feel that only small-scale operators like us can offer," according to an official of the company. (November 9, 2013)

Ethical fashion: Shopping with a social conscience

People in Japan have begun to take an interest in ethical fashion. In April, a select shop, United Arrows, sold canvas bags handmade by women living in slums and other areas in Kenya. A clothing exhibition named "rooms" was held for three days from Sept. 11, and an area dedicated to introducing ethical fashion was set up for the first time with about 30 firms participating from Japan, Britain and other nations.

Ethical fashion includes dresses and ornaments produced and sold with an emphasis on environmental protection and social contribution. It includes, for example, clothing made from organic materials that are less of an environmental burden to produce, and accessories made in developing nations with consideration for fair labor environments.

"Italian ethical fashion brands provide high-quality and well-designed products that consumers want to have and buy," said Simone Cipriani, an official in charge of ethical fashion promotion at the International Trade Center, a U.N. subsidiary organization headquartered in Geneva.



“Thanks to those approaches in Italy, a country with a thriving fashion industry, the movement will spread faster around the world.”

Character mascot contest heating up

The Yomiuri Shimbun Voting in the Yurukyara Grand Prix 2013, an annual popularity contest for mascot characters, is set to end Friday, with Tokyo’s cast of characters aiming to improve in the rankings to be announced later this month.

A total of 51 characters from various parts of Tokyo are participating in the contest. Organizations that own the characters are competing fiercely to raise their name recognition at events. The Yomiuri Shimbun is the poll’s official media partner.

Tokyo’s characters faced an uphill battle last year, with Sugamon ranking 56th, the highest. Yurukyara fans are wondering whether Tokyo will be able to strike back this year.

Sugamon is a mascot character of the Sugamo Jizo Dori Shotengai shopping street in Toshima Ward. The mascot has appeared at events organized by a business association to promote the shopping street, and this year attended a private wedding ceremony.

Although the association has made its best efforts to raise Sugamon’s popularity, Yuichi Ikeda, 37, a director of the association, expressed worry over this year’s contest. “We feel pressure because an increasing number of new characters are appearing,” he said.

The Israeli Embassy in Japan in Chiyoda Ward made its foray into the contest with Shalom-chan. The character was chosen from among about 500 design applications in June. The embassy embarked on the project to make the character a “liason” for introducing Israel to Japan.

“We hope it ranks in the top half,” an official of the embassy in charge of the mascot said.

Edo-chan, a mascot officially endorsed by Edogawa Ward to promote the safety of agricultural products from the ward, also entered the contest for the first time.

The ward office is making efforts to boost the character’s name recognition by having it appear at such events as promotional festivals for agricultural cooperatives.

Shibasaki Saki is a character from the Shibasaki district in Chofu, western Tokyo. Greeting in Tama, a citizens group in charge of the character, has been promoting the mascot on its Twitter account, aware that the vote is being cast on the Internet.



Weekly News From Tokyo

4 Nov. – 10 Nov. 2013

Shibasaki Saki ranked 160th last year. As the mascot is not officially recognized by the Chofu city government, it is rarely seen on the streets. However, the mascot has gradually achieved popularity, as it was invited to such events as the Sports Festival in Tokyo 2013.

Three characters joined the race from the Togoshi district in Shinagawa Ward.

Togoshi Ginjiro has the longest history as a yurukyara in the district, and is a mascot of Togoshi Ginza Shotengai shopping street.

The mascot made its debut in 2004 and has grown in popularity ever since. These days, the district is visited by tourists who want to buy goods related to the character.

Also participating in the contest are Togotcho, a character operated by a residents association in the district's 5-chome area, and the pair Minami-chan & Ryunoshin that belong to a business association for a shopping street near the south gate of Togoshi-koen Station.

The three are not rival characters, but instead cooperate in local events and on other occasions.

An official of the business association for Togoshi Ginza Shotengai shopping street said: "Having several characters at event makes it more impressive. We want to enliven our local community [with the characters]."

The vote is taking place online at: <http://www.yurugp.jp/>. The winner of the grand prix will be announced at the Yurukyara summit on Nov. 23 and 24 in Hanyu, Saitama Prefecture. Last year's winner was Bari-san of Imabari, Ehime Prefecture, while Kumamon from Kumamoto Prefecture took the top spot in 2011. (November 7, 2013)