

Bringing Home the Bacon

Jason P. Morgan is the man they call “The Meat Guy.” Ham, sausages or sirloin steak. Whatever meat you want, wherever you are in Japan, he’ll sell it to you. Just don’t ask him to mince his words.

“We have a really tight relationship with our customers,” says Morgan, “That’s because they can feel like they are buying from someone who actually cares about what he is selling to them.”

Morgan grew up on his family’s cattle ranch in Nebraska (“not that big for a ranch ... about the size of Nagoya”). After university in Washington, D.C., he spent six months working in South Korea, and then in 1996 arrived in Japan. His first stop was the Ise home of a Japanese girl he had met in South Korea.

“All I had was 600 bucks in my pocket, which wasn’t enough for a return ticket,” he recalls, “and her address.”

Like many young arrivals to Japan, he started off in an *eikaiwa*. But it wasn’t long before Morgan had plans for bigger things. While working at the language school in Yokkaichi, Mie Prefecture, he persuaded his boss to help him set up a business. The plan was to promote exports from the

city of Vernon (California) and help the municipality attract Japanese investment. His boss agreed with just one condition: he name a date when he’d stop working for the school.

Morgan recalls: “He said, ‘That’s fine, but if you try to be an English teacher and do your own business at the same time, you’ll be a bad English teacher and never get any business done.’ It was pretty good advice.”

Before long, Morgan had branched out into importing steaks from the family ranch back home in Nebraska to sell to friends and local restaurants. He’s been in the meat business ever since.

Today, his company, TMG International, boasts an annual turnover of over \$1 million, and has “pretty much doubled in size every year.” Half of the hundreds of shipments a week are to restaurants and half to online customers. About three-quarters of the customers are Japanese and the rest foreigners dotted all over Japan.

As well as its main shop window (www.themeatguy.jp), the company has Webshops on Rakuten and Yahoo sites. Each week TMG places 100 or so items on Internet auctions. These products sell for less than

◀ BIOGRAPHY ▶

Jason P. Morgan

- Age 35
- B.A., International Business and Marketing, The American University, Washington, D.C.
- Speaks English, Japanese
- Co-chair ACCJ Chubu Chapter’s Independent Business Committee
- Likes: “Annoying vegetarians and getting thrown out of bars”
- Married to Saori, two sons
- www.themeatguy.jp

retail price; but for every person who buys, several hundred see the listing and visit the sites. Morgan cheerfully terms that “getting paid to advertise.”

In Morgan’s words, TMG is a niche marketer. It stocks many unusual products that are otherwise overlooked by bigger retailers. During Expo 2005 Aichi, TMG sold no less than 25,000 quarter-pounders of kangaroo meat. It offers an extensive range of Halal meat, and its Web site is trilingual: English, Japanese and Tagalog.

Morgan gives another example of a niche-market product: “One of our hottest-selling items is a 1kg block of strip loin, which is nothing that special, except that [in Japan] you’ll never find anything that weighs one kilogram in the meat counter.”

One new business project is an online pet-food store.

The reality is that there are few new meat companies in Japan. “It’s mostly controlled by big heavy hitters ... Nobody likes to see someone jump in and disrupt that ... and that is kind of what we do.”

“They are basically our [regular] products, but targeted to people who want to feed them to their pets,” he says. “A typical pet deli order will be stuff like turkey breast and ostrich steaks and ground kangaroo.” The portions are a little smaller and the prices similar to the products for humans, which helps TMG’s margins. “I look at it and think, ‘Wow, their dog eats better than me!’” says Morgan.

But it’s not always easy to be a small business in Japan. “One of the biggest challenges I face is trying to purchase,” Morgan laments. “Countless times we have tried to purchase ... and have had the gray suits just walk out and not sell it to me.”

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Another challenge is coping with an extensive inventory of niche-market items. “We sell and stock a lot of products for a company our size, and that is a monstrous challenge,” says Morgan. “But we do it with really strict inventory tolerances.” TMG orders in very small quantities and makes some items like sausages and kebabs.

In other ways, though, being a small player in a big market is a boon. “We are a small family business, which



Nagoya’s “Meat Guy”—from sprawling Nebraska cattle ranch to small, family niche business.

means we enjoy what we are doing,” says Morgan. “There is a lot of levity involved.”

The girl from Ise, Saori, who first drew him to Japan, is Morgan’s wife. Together they work with five other staff members at the TMG office and warehouse beneath their home. They have two sons, Ulysses (5) and Perseus (2). The company is deeply involved in the local community, which for TMG means not only their surrounding neighborhood, but also the Nagoya business

community and the larger foreign community in Japan.

“If there are other foreigners out there importing stuff that we could sell, we always try and do business with them,” says Morgan. They donate meat to good causes when they can and help with charity events organized by some of their customers. Each year they take part in the ACCJ Nagoya Walkathon.

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